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Environmental Justice and Grassroots Environmentalism  
in the San Francisco Bay Area

Henry Clark and Ahmadia Thomas

FIGHTING TOXIC EMISSIONS IN RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA, 1984-2000

With an Introduction by  
Luke W. Cole

Interviews Conducted by  
Carl Wilmsen  
in 1999 and 2000

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Copy no. 1



## INTRODUCTION by Luke W. Cole

The San Francisco Bay Area is blessed in many ways: stunning natural beauty, a global center of finance and high technology, a locale of unparalleled intellectual achievement and educational resources, one of the most diverse and polyglot metropolitan areas in the world. These riches have come at a price, however. A significant despoilation of the environment, coupled with racial segregation and a tremendous stratification of income, mean that not all Bay Area residents share in its bounty. Hundreds of toxic sites, ancient polluting power plants, mammoth oil refineries, lead-contaminated housing, poisoned workers—all of these environmental ills are the costs of our wealth. Santa Clara County, the home of Silicon Valley and its glittering high-tech promise, also hosts more Superfund toxic clean-up sites than any other county in the United States. Bayview-Hunters Point in San Francisco has some of the highest rates of breast cancer in the world.

Fortunately, the San Francisco Bay Area also has the highest density, per capita, of environmental justice activists in the United States. The many tributaries that feed the national Environmental Justice Movement are or have been present here, as well—the labor movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the farmworker struggle, the anti-toxics movement. Indeed, some of these tributaries have their headwaters here. American Indians occupied Alcatraz from November 1969 to June 1971, and some of the leaders of that occupation were central players in the American Indian Movement; today's national Indigenous Environmental Network grew out of those earlier struggles. The Asian Pacific Environmental Network, a national network catalyzed by Bay Area Asian Americans, was born and still lives in Oakland. The legal piece to the environmental justice movement had an early spark in the 1969 suit on behalf of six migrant farmworkers that ultimately banned the deadly pesticide DDT, a suit brought by Ralph Santiago Abascal of San Francisco-based California Rural Legal Assistance. The list of the Bay Area's contributions to the environmental justice movement is long and varied.

It is thus fitting that some of its leaders' stories are gathered in this series. The five leaders whose oral histories make up this collection are giants in the Bay Area movement, and many are leaders of national stature.

Carl Anthony is a visionary, a man whose many hats have included academic, architect, urban planner, planning commission chair, military base conversion director, mediator, convener, author, editor and now funder. Beyond Carl's alacrity in almost every situation, beyond his path-breaking work on urban environmentalism, even beyond his institutional legacy in the many groups he has formed, focused, fueled and furthered, is his wonderful ability to bring people together. Whether it was warring parties in West Berkeley, who made peace and brought sustainable development to that oft-neglected neighborhood, or competitors for resources at newly-closed military bases, Carl has brought people together to talk and to discover their common ground and—more often than not—further the common good. Sometimes, Carl's bringing people together for a conversation across divides—be they ideology, class, race, education or experience—can be the achievement in and of itself, so even those dialogues which in retrospect may seem ephemeral, like Urban Habitat's long colloquy with Earth Island, leave everyone involved enriched. Carl's oral history series is another of his gifts to the Bay Area, and its readers will be similarly enriched.

Henry Clark could be called a professor of social change, so deep are his roots and so broad is his experience in its movements. One of the few environmental justice activists who is also Ph.D., Henry is an instantly recognizable figure at Bay Area political events in his trademark tiny gold glasses. An indefatigable activist who has operated out of a storefront office on Macdonald Avenue in Richmond for more than fifteen years, Henry walks the walk. While others talk of "working with the community," Henry *is* "the community"—a lifelong Richmond resident, still there and still fighting. His resourcefulness in

working with residents of Richmond—an extremely economically depressed African American town facing more than its share of environmental and social challenges—in fighting some of the largest polluters in the world, and winning, is instructive. His persistence in the face of adversity, his seemingly Sisyphean struggle, has brought concrete change to the lives of Richmond residents and has been an example to activists across the U.S. In one small anecdote that demonstrates Henry’s effectiveness, in the early 1990s the chairman of Chevron, at that time the largest oil company in the United States, told stockholders at an annual meeting that Chevron had two political problems: its investments in South Africa, and the West County Toxics Coalition.

Pam Tau Lee has been instrumental in focusing the movement on the concerns of workers, particularly workers of color, in dangerous occupations, helping make workplace safety an environmental justice issue. Her trainings through the Labor Occupational Health Program have reached thousands of workers and educators. Pam has also been a key player in many of the institutions that have shaped the national Environmental Justice Movement. Her involvement with the National Toxics Campaign helped that organization undertake an agonizing self-assessment of racial and class privilege, one which the group could not ultimately survive. She was there at the beginning of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), one of the first appointees to that body, and one who helped steer its initial course. She is a founding board member of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. She is a catalyst for change, with national influence.

Ted Smith has achieved an enviable status as an activist: his organization is celebrating its twentieth birthday this year, and some of his best ideas have been codified as federal law. Ideas that percolated up from the work of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition—like hazardous materials and underground storage tank ordinances, the Toxics Release Inventory and community right-to-know—are now accepted parts of our regulatory framework. Ted had the prescience and fortuity to take on the high-tech industry from the start, and has long been a sage prophet of the computer industry’s environmental excesses. While his policy work is perhaps most far-reaching in its impact, his coalition and network building is as important and makes the policy work happen. Ted’s role as a cagey political strategist is well captured in his oral history, and is a handbook for those who follow.

Ahmadia Thomas is the volunteer’s volunteer. From the Girl Reserves as a young adult, to the VISTA program in the 1960s, to welfare rights organizing in the 1970s, to the Citizens Action League and ACORN in the 1980s, to the West County Toxics Coalition and the Gray Panthers in the 1990s, Mrs. Thomas has had volunteering for community service and social change as her life’s vocation. Her commitment, demonstrated on the ground and in the office in nearly fifty years of movement work of one form or another, is remarkable.

Indeed, a common thread in each of their stories is that of commitment to social justice. It is also instructive that none of these activists emerged out of the environmental movement. They all came to environmental justice work from the justice side: out of civil rights and poverty law work (Smith), welfare rights organizing (Thomas), labor (Lee) or work against the Vietnam War and apartheid (Clark). All of them are “lifers,” however—among the few who have devoted their careers to ending injustice. Their example is our inspiration, and our challenge.

The story of the Bay Area is one of migration, and the activists’ stories collected in this series are no exception. Henry Clark and Pam Tau Lee were both born here, but to parents who arrived from elsewhere. Henry’s parents came from the southern U.S., and Pam’s from Fresno. Interestingly, Pennsylvania gave us both Carl Anthony and Ahmadia Thomas, while New York yielded Ted Smith. The magnet for talent that is the Bay Area is demonstrated here; I leave for other students of social movements to distill the particular things in the Bay Area that make it such a fertile ground.

I have been fortunate to know and work with these talented activists. Henry and Mrs. Thomas and I have walked the picket line at Chevron's gates, and I have represented the West County Toxics Coalition in court. Pam and I both served on U.S. EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Ted and I have been panelists together at conferences. Carl and I have had a fruitful collaboration for more than a decade, publishing the *Race, Poverty & the Environment* journal; I was one of the original board members of the Urban Habitat Project. The Bay Area environmental justice community is large, but it is also small enough that we know each other and work with each other, and I am privileged to have had these five as my teachers and to call them my friends.

This impressive collection of oral histories is hopefully merely a prelude to a larger effort to gather the lives and lessons of Bay Area environmental justice leaders. The oral historian's work is set, with activist journalist Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez, Indigenous Women's Network founder Nilak Butler, occupational safety and health pioneer Mandy Hawes, PODER leader Antonio Diaz, long-time Center for Third World Organizing director Francis Calpotura, brilliant legal strategist Richard Toshiyuki Drury of Communities for a Better Environment, Chinatown defender Gordon Mar, Greenaction founder and perennial rabble-rouser Bradley Angel, and Hunters Point stalwart Olin Webb among the dozens of potential interviewees. We look forward to reading their stories, too.

Luke W. Cole  
San Francisco, November 2002





## INTERVIEW HISTORY by Carl Wilmsen

Robert Bullard's writings on environmental justice piqued my interest immediately when I first became acquainted with them in the mid-1990s. At that time I was researching the conflict over the use and management of a sustained yield unit on the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico for my dissertation in geography. The parallels between communities of color around the United States which bear a disproportionate risk of exposure to hazardous substances and the Hispano communities adjacent to the sustained yield unit which have not shared equally in the benefits of the unit's management struck me as resulting from the same broad political, economic, and social processes. As it happened, Carl Anthony's career touched on the sustained yield unit as the conflict there spread to the board room of Earth Island Institute. At issue were conflicting advertisements taken out in national newspapers by separate members of the Earth Island organization. One advertisement supported the efforts of Hispano community members in New Mexico to pursue land-based livelihoods that included logging, and the other advertisement endorsed a hard-line "zero-cut" approach to management of the nation's national forests. Efforts to reconcile this contradiction ultimately led to Mr. Anthony and his Urban Habitat Program separating from Earth Island Institute.

While I knew that these events had occurred, it was not until the late 1990s that I actually met Carl Anthony. After completing my dissertation in New Mexico I began working at ROHO conducting oral histories in the environment and natural resources project area. My initial work focused on leaders of mainstream environmental groups, particularly the Sierra Club. Yet, the work of mainstream environmental groups and environmental justice (EJ) organizations diverges in many significant ways. As a result, although mainstream and EJ groups occasionally work together on specific projects, they often have difficulty forging lasting coalitions. Wanting to understand the foundations of these differences, I began exploring ways to develop an oral history project on EJ leaders in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the same time, I could not help but notice that the ROHO environmental collection did not include oral histories of EJ leaders, nor of many other environmental leaders outside of the mainstream environmental movement. The oral histories in this series thus are the result of an effort to diversify ROHO's collection, as well as to collect the stories and insights of people with unique and important perspectives on the environment and the human relationship to it.

I began the project by contacting Carl Anthony. With his many connections and broad experience in the Environmental Justice Movement, he seemed like a natural person with whom to start. He agreed immediately to participate, and also provided me with the names of several other EJ leaders to consider interviewing. Despite his very busy schedule, Mr. Anthony set aside three consecutive Thursday afternoons in July and August of 1999 to meet with me. We met in his office at the Urban Habitat Program in the Presidio in San Francisco and conducted interviews of about two hours each.

Henry Clark was next. After agreeing to be interviewed, Dr. Clark graciously gave me access to the files of newspaper clippings he has kept over the years of stories about the West County Toxics Coalition's activities. In addition to providing me with my major source of information on the coalition prior to the interview, researching these files resulted in another fortuitous occurrence. While conducting research in these files at the coalition's office on McDonald Avenue in Richmond, I happened to meet Ms. Ahmadia Thomas. I gathered very quickly from our casual conversations that Ms. Thomas had been involved in social justice activism for many, many years, and that she too would be an important person to include in this oral history project. Thus, after conducting three two-hour interviews with Dr. Clark at the coalition's office during December of 1999, I returned a fourth time to interview Ms. Thomas.

Following these interviews I began research on the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition in preparation for interviewing Ted Smith. The SVTC has extensive files on all of its activities and Mr. Smith and the SVTC staff were very gracious and helpful in providing me access to them. One day in April, 2000, I made the two-hour BART and bus trip to San Jose to spend the day going through these files. I subsequently made four additional trips during which I would spend the morning reading through the files in a meeting room and would spend about two hours in the afternoon interviewing Mr. Smith in his office.

The final interview was with Pam Tau Lee. Since Ms. Lee works on the UC Berkeley campus, my commute consisted of a five-minute walk from The Bancroft Library to the Labor Occupational Health program's offices on Fulton Street. We conducted four interviews in her office, or in a small meeting room across the hall, during June, July, and August of 2000. Like the interviews with Mr. Anthony, Dr. Clark, Ms. Thomas, and Mr. Smith, we were undisturbed for the duration except for occasional telephone calls and short interruptions to attend to office business.

On August 1, 2000, I left ROHO for a position as coordinator of the Community Forestry Research Fellowship program in the College of Natural Resources at UC Berkeley. Assuming this position brought new responsibilities, and thus required that I complete the editing and processing of the oral histories of these EJ leaders in my spare time. This slowed down completion of the project considerably. Nevertheless, I worked on them as my time permitted, and finally, more than two years after conducting the last interview with Ms. Lee, the transcripts are now ready for deposit in the archives.

Like all transcripts of interviews conducted by ROHO, these are the product of the efforts of several individuals. The interview tapes were transcribed by ROHO staff, after which I edited them to assure that the meanings of the spoken words were not lost in their translation to written text. Despite their busy schedules, Mr. Anthony, Dr. Clark, Ms. Thomas, Mr. Smith, and Ms. Lee then further edited the transcripts to make sure that I had not mangled their intended meaning as well as to clarify or add more detail to any topics they felt were in need of such adjustment.

The resulting texts tell the stories of five remarkable individuals and how the paths they chose to follow in life have led them to careers in the Environmental Justice Movement. They tell of how these individuals have worked to overcome challenges, of how they have built networks of relationships in pursuit of a more just society, and how they have worked for precedent-setting policies and practices that have helped alleviate the environmental and social impacts of industrial processes. Above all, the transcripts bespeak the unwavering commitment of these individuals to social justice and to making the world a better place for all of humanity.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carl Wilmsen  
Interviewer/Editor

Albany, California  
December, 2002

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Environmental Justice and Grassroots Environmentalism  
in the San Francisco Bay Area

Henry Clark

HENRY CLARK AND THE WEST COUNTY TOXICS COALITION

Interviews Conducted by  
Carl Wilmsen  
in 1999

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Henry Clark

*Photo by Don Gosney*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS—Henry Clark

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	xi
I BOYHOOD IN RICHMOND, UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION, AND EARLY CAREER	1
Growing Up with a Concern for Justice	1
North Richmond: A Challenging Social and Physical Environment	3
Developing an Activist Approach to Spirituality	6
An Appreciation for Music, and Reading Socialist Literature	9
The Social Sciences and Campus Activism at San Francisco State University, 1974-1980	11
Neighborhood House and Corporate Influence on Social Service Organizations, 1980-1985	14
II THE WORK OF THE WEST COUNTY TOXICS COALITION, 1984-PRESENT	19
Early Days at West County Toxics Coalition	19
Organizing Campaigns Dealing with Chevron Oil Refinery Impacts on the Community	21
Bringing Chevron to the Negotiating Table	24
Little Assistance from Labor Unions and Environmental Groups on the Chevron Campaign	26
Working with Government Agencies, and the Role of Lawsuits	29
A Lawsuit over the General Chemical Company Sulfuric Acid Release of 1993	31
Exxon Valdez, Chevron, Dioxin and the Clean Water Act	33
A Community Early Warning System, and the Difficulties of Organizing	35
Fund Raising for WCTC	37
Professional Development and Networking in the Environmental Justice Movement	39
Good Neighbor Agreements, and Concerns about Cancer in Richmond	41
The Erickson Hazardous Waste Treatment and Transfer Station, and the Good Neighbor Ordinance	43
Community Health Concerns	45
The Safeway Fire	46
The United Heckathorn Superfund Site	47
The West County Landfill	49
Incorporating Environmental Justice Concerns into Company Accident Prevention Plans and County Redevelopment Plans	49
III THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF WCTC'S WORK	55
President Clinton's Executive Order on Environmental Justice	55
Globalization and Environmental Justice	56
NAFTA and WTO: Allowing Companies to Get Away with Murder	57
Networking with Other Groups: Regional and International Involvements	59
Returning to Graduate School to Earn a Ph.D. in Religious Counseling	60
Encouraging Responsible Economic Development in North Richmond	62
Perspectives on Relations Between Environmental Justice Groups and "Mainstream" Environmental Groups	64
Founding a National Organization of Afro-American Environmental Justice Activists, 1999	67
Further Reflections on the "Mainstream" Movement	68
A Summary of the Success of the West County Toxics Coalition	70



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Dr Henry Clark  
Date of birth 9-14-44 Birthplace Richmond, GA  
Father's full name Jimmy Clark  
Occupation Barber Birthplace Lewisville, Arkansas  
Mother's full name Sadie Clark  
Occupation Housewife Birthplace Louisville, Arkansas  
Your spouse RAY ANN THOMAS  
Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Birthplace Tamalah, Louisiana  
Your children Omar Clark

Where did you grow up? Richmond, GA  
Present community North Richmond  
Education Dr. Comparative Religious Education,  
Religious Counseling  
Occupation(s) Community Organizer

Areas of expertise Community Organizing,

Other interests or activities Reading, traveling,

Organizations in which you are active West County Toxics Coalition

SIGNATURE Dr. Henry Clark

DATE: 12-8-2000



## INTERVIEW WITH HENRY CLARK

**I BOYHOOD IN RICHMOND, UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION, AND  
EARLY CAREER**

[Interview 1: December 6, 1999] ##<sup>1</sup>

**Growing Up with a Concern for Justice**

Wilmsen: Today is December 6, 1999, and this is the first interview with Henry Clark. If we could just start out by talking a little bit about your family background. When and where were you born?

Clark: I was born in North Richmond on September 14, 1944.

Wilmsen: And you grew up here? Spent all your life here?

Clark: Yes, most of my life was spent here in Richmond with some brief period—a couple of years—in San Luis Obispo, working at Cal Poly State University there. A couple of years there, and then Oakland, but primarily here in Richmond.

Wilmsen: And what did your parents do for work?

Clark: Well, my father was a barber and my mother, she was a housewife. They moved here in the early forties from Arkansas.

Wilmsen: What do you think were the most important influences on you when you were growing up?

Clark: Well, the most important influences on me probably were a gentleman named Charlie Reed, who was the director of Shields Reed Park in North Richmond, and another

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1.## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

community activist person named Cal Anderson. Basically they were two people in the community that were activists in the community.

Mr. Reed worked for the Shields Reed Park, and Cal Anderson worked for Neighborhood House. They worked with the young people in the community to encourage them in a positive direction. Then as I grew up in the early sixties, you know, in terms of that particular whole period of time—with the civil rights movement and the Black Power Movement, as it was called—the people probably that were on the national scene were probably people like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

Wilmsen: You were born in 1944, so you were twenty in 1964.

Clark: Yes.

Wilmsen: Were you active in the civil rights movement at all?

Clark: Yes, well, I was active primarily in the anti-war movement.

Wilmsen: How did you get involved in that?

Clark: Well, I was formulating my own opinions during that particular period of time, and I didn't feel that it was a fair or just war situation, and I was a conscientious objector.

Wilmsen: So you didn't serve in the military during the Vietnam War?

Clark: No, I didn't serve in the military, in that particular sense, but I felt that I served the country and I served the cause by trying to shed some light on the real cause of the war and the situation there that was going on. So I wasn't directly in the military, but I feel that my contribution was more important under the circumstances—rather than me going to Vietnam and being shot at or possibly killed, or me killing some other people over there.

But I'm glad that I made that decision because now I work with a whole lot of Asian people, you know, and people from Vietnam, or Laos, or Cambodia. And you know, in terms of the environmental justice work that I'm involved in, I appreciate working with people in a positive way, rather than if I went over there and had been killing some Asian people, personally. So no, I didn't. I wasn't in the military directly, but I feel that my contribution was a better contribution.

Wilmsen: What did that entail?

Clark: It entailed myself personally making a commitment on my beliefs by refusing to go to the war, for one thing. And the education that I could do in terms of my experience in participating in rallies and activities.

Wilmsen: Now, some conscientious objectors served jail time. Did you serve any jail time?

Clark: No, I didn't serve any jail time, but I was certainly prepared to do so. But I was classified as conscientious objector and, no, I didn't have to serve any jail time.



Wilmsen: Are you a Quaker?

Clark: No, I'm not.

Wilmsen: What did you feel were the unjust causes of the war that you mentioned?

Clark: First of all, I didn't feel that we needed to be in that war in that country—like many wars that we are fighting. You know, I think people need to determine their own destiny. I believe in self-determination for people. People determine their own destiny.

And I just don't think that our system had a message at this particular time. And it just didn't ring true to me in terms of why we were there in the first place.

### **North Richmond: A Challenging Social and Physical Environment**

Wilmsen: Okay. Back to growing up in Richmond. What was it like while you were growing up here?

Clark: Well, I grew up in North Richmond, in the unincorporated area of Richmond, which is actually considered much more complicated, more troublesome than Richmond. It's basically like the last frontier, as I would say. Basically when people mention North Richmond, unfortunately it doesn't have a good reputation, due to a lot of crime and violence there. It's a place where people primarily ride through with their windows and doors locked or, you know, don't stay too long. Of course many people that are there can't afford to leave. Some do leave, because of the condition there, to try to find a better place, and because the way conditions are now, even. In other places, you know, there's crime and violence and the quality of life is not so good, but basically, that was the type of situation or the character or reputation in North Richmond they have, even to date. So you know, growing up there in North Richmond, it was a very challenging experience.

Basically my dedication was to get an education, to come back and help the community, which was one of the sayings that was talked about during the upheaval period of the sixties and seventies. And so that's what I finally did. You know, to go to school and get an education, and come back here and help the community where I was born and raised—to make some type of a positive change.

Of course, my childhood and coming up there in the area unfortunately wasn't quite trouble-free from the many other negative elements that children growing up there in North Richmond are exposed to. Unfortunately in that type of environment, you've got to try to do the best that you can. Some people don't even make it to older age, you know, for various reasons, particularly because the widespread crime and violence in the community. Unfortunately. It's a challenging experience.

Wilmsen: What were some of your favorite activities while you were growing up?

Clark: Well, my favorite activities were—I liked school, always did—you know, going to school, the education, learning. Also, basically it was sports, because Shields Reed Park was primarily the major place that you could go to, and so I was involved in athletics. I played most sports: baseball, basketball, football, but I concentrated in basketball.

Wilmsen: You mentioned Charlie Reed and Cal Anderson. Were there other people that you liked to spend a lot of time with?

Clark: Well, I didn't actually spend a lot of time with them other than seeing them at the park or at the Neighborhood House. They basically stand out because of the fact that they were people that were trying to make a difference in young peoples' lives, and that's really what made them stand out. Probably if you talk to older people from North Richmond, they will mention those two names as people who really were caring individuals that tried to really make a difference, particularly in young peoples' lives.

Wilmsen: Were there particular parts of town that you liked to hang around in, or parts that you avoided?

Clark: Primarily, as I said, most of my activities were in North Richmond, you know, especially there at the park.

At one point there was a pool hall there, which has long been closed. But it was primarily North Richmond at Minnie Lou's Cafe, there, or sometimes at the Savoy Club. Because North Richmond, for the Bay Area, was the place to go, especially for entertainment. A lot of really famous rhythm and blues entertainers, the blues entertainers, came through North Richmond, either there at the Savoy Club or Minnie Lou's Cafe. So North Richmond for the Bay Area, you know, especially when it came to entertainment, it was the place to come. And so that was the experience there in North Richmond. So primarily it was there. You know, the different places that I went to were primarily focused there.

Wilmsen: Were there parts of town that you tried to avoid?

Clark: Well, not actually tried to avoid. Unfortunately if you were from North Richmond you had to be careful in going to certain other parts of Richmond—South Richmond or Central Richmond—because you know, unfortunately there were people that felt that they own South Richmond or Central Richmond, or that type of nonsense like you have today even more so with gang activity in different areas. They don't want people from certain areas to frequent those locales—that type of foolishness. But it really didn't deter me or frighten me in any type of way. You know, I basically went where I wanted to go. But you had to obviously be cautious.

Wilmsen: What do you remember about the physical environment?

Clark: The physical environment was basically a place that primarily needed development. You know, it needed to be upgraded, and North Richmond is not a wealthy community—people from the lower income, primarily. I mean, obviously, streets needed paving, and it just needed a lot of upgrading—you know, beautification.

Basically the city, nor the county that has the jurisdiction over North Richmond, had not really invested a lot of resources in the community in terms of infrastructure. People were basically trying to do the best that they could to struggle to live, and so that's pretty much what was the picture.

Wilmsen: Was there noticeable pollution or anything like that?

Clark: In terms of the pollution stuff, we lived next to the oil refinery, next to the Chevron Refinery. Next to it in the sense that the refinery is located on the mountain range, and in between the refinery and our house there's a field which I understand is owned by Chevron. So as you leave from the refinery on the hills and look there to the first streets in the residential area, the first house is our house. So that's why we say that North Richmond is on the front line of the chemical assault because whenever there was any fires and explosions, that would rock the houses like they were caught in an earthquake, or we would be hit—the community would be hit first and my residence, I would be hit first—and people on that street, because we were the first street there.

Wilmsen: Do you remember any accidents where toxics came near your house?

Clark: Oh, yes. I can remember clearly waking up many mornings and finding the leaves on the tree burnt crisp overnight from chemical exposure, or going outside and the air would be so foul that you would literally have to grab your nose and try to not breath the air and go back in the house and wait until it was cleared up. Those type of situations, you know, were a common experience.

Wilmsen: What would you do if the air was so bad on, say, a school morning when you had to be at school?

Clark: I don't actually remember that I had to ever take off from school because the air was actually bad on any particular school day. I never had to take off from school for that—from the chemicals being so bad. On certain occasions, I do remember I had to go back in the house, but that was a little later in life. In terms of going to school, I don't actually remember having to stay home because of any chemicals in the air.

The only time that I had to actually stay home for any reason from school was because of flooding in the community. We have two creeks—San Pablo Creek and Wildcat Creek—that run through the community, and they feed out into the bay, which is just in North Richmond area. In terms of the watershed that starts in the east, in the Tilden Park area, it all comes down through the creeks flowing through San Pablo area, through North Richmond, as it's going out to the bay. Well, by the time it gets to North Richmond, okay, the creeks were not properly built, and so we would end up, here again, getting flooded out. And in heavy rains the water would just come and settle in front of the house, especially on the Battery Street, that area, because it was like on the lower end.

Sometimes we would have to get a long board to put from the walkway out to the street so that we could get out and go to school. Or other occasions, it was so flooded that you couldn't get out and so, you know, we would have to stay at home. Of course it was quite interesting, I can say, as a kid, as I recall seeing that experience, because, you know, fish would be swimming by the house. [laughs] That was quite an experience.

But that was only in the flooding. And I actually have been able to help solve that situation, also, because I now, as a member of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council that governs the unincorporated area—we are the first elected officials of the community. The council was appointed for the first year by the county board of supervisors, but we wanted to be elected rather than appointed, so now the Municipal Advisory Council is an elective office where residents in North Richmond go to the ballot box to elect the officials of North Richmond. We still have a county supervisor over the area, but locally the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council is the governing body. And so, being part of the Municipal Advisory Council we were able to actually put up some of the money to complete the flood control projects that broadened the creeks so that the community would not be flooded out anymore, and people in the area would not have to pay flood insurance every year, which most people cannot afford to do anyway. And so being on the council, I was able to be part of the effort to eliminate that flooding.

Wilmsen: That's great.

Clark: Yes.

Wilmsen: When did that occur?

Clark: Let's see, when was that? The council has been in existence now I think about six or seven years. Probably in the last six years.

### **Developing an Activist Approach to Spirituality**

Wilmsen: Okay. Was religion important in your upbringing?

Clark: Yes. Religion was important in my upbringing. My parents, you know, sent us to church regularly on Sundays. Of course I went primarily to a community church called Davis Chapel there, a Methodist church. We as kids, though, unfortunately—I guess I'd had some particular sense of the importance of religion, but you know, coming up as a kid, it just really didn't quite stick the way that it should at the particular time. So you know, unless we went to church with an adult or something, we might even play hooky from church.

Wilmsen: That sounds like a pretty normal kid thing. [laughs]

Clark: Yes, so then there was a period of time when I didn't actually go to any church at all. But then, also, I was exposed to the religion of Islam for a period of time, and actually I have a PhD in comparative religious education and religious counseling now.

One of the problems is that religion didn't go—the churches or the places of worship in the community—I didn't really think that they were actually playing the role that they should in terms of addressing the social problems in the community or trying to improve the quality of life of people in the community. In that sense, yes, in terms of good moral standards, yes, you know, in terms of ethics, trying to teach people basically



how to live an “upright” life, or to avoid a lot of the lifestyle problems and other things, and—depending on what particular denomination or religion a person is in—preparing yourself for some future, you know, judgment or future life, beyond this plane of existence. Of course you know the thing is that different religions teach different things about beyond the graveyard. It’s like a hodgepodge of different types of beliefs. If a person were seeking out religion or seeking God, there are so many different denominations and beliefs out there, that say, you know, this way, that way, and here you are, and life has been here for ages, how are you to know which one is the right one, and so there’s this type of confusion.

But in addition to that, there’s the role of the churches or religion in the communities. I believe that religion should play an active role in terms of addressing the many problems and social issues in our communities, and they do not. They do not do that, you know, period. Even the ones that do have some sense of a social consciousness—you know, they may have a meeting or two here or there—but in terms of really addressing the wide range of social problems and issues in our community, they don’t do that. And I feel that ministers or churches, or mosques, or places of worship in the community, should be taking the lead—providing leadership on all issues, not only beyond the graveyard and the good by and by, but the right now. That just did not really occur in any major way, so you know, I had some serious problems there.

So in that particular approach, I’m not a spiritual person. But I am a spiritual person because like I say, I do have credentials as well as qualifications as being a minister. I don’t usually flaunt the titles, but you know, I do have all of those credentials, in addition, as I’ve indicated, I have a PhD in comparative religious education and counseling. But I believe more in an activist type approach like I do here with the West County Toxics Coalition—in terms of environmental justice work—and there on the Municipal Advisory Council, and many other different social issues and causes that affect peoples’ life. And so that’s, you know, where I’m coming from. I guess you can call it more of a liberation theology.

Wilmsen: And how did you reach those conclusions about the church? I’m assuming this is later in life that—

Clark: Yes, pretty much. Yes, not only in terms of any type of formulation. I guess probably as a kid coming up, you know, it was like just some vagueness. I just really didn’t get the message. The church was a place there; it was something that my parents taught me that you should go to on Sundays. But it never really grabbed me or struck me as vital. It never really touched my heart and my mind to really become a meaningful—

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Clark: It really didn’t relate to, I guess, my social environment. It’s like six days out of the week I’m in the community. The church is not really active and involved in trying to improve the quality of life there, but then all of a sudden, on Sunday, you know, I’m going to church, or going to a place of worship. Really, the importance of it just did not come through.

I’m well aware of the reason why that is now. I think it’s because of the fact that, you know, most of them don’t want to rock the boat. They want to be as accepted rather than

really telling the truth or really speaking out against wrong-doing, speaking out against injustices. Most of them don't do that because they don't want to rock the boat. And the bottom line, in my assessment, is that same thing. It's like many people—religious leaders—said about Martin Luther King when he was living, and leading protests and demonstrations, and all, saying that he should not be doing that, because the minister's place was in the pulpit, you know, rather than out in the streets leading protestors and demonstrations against social evils. Which to me is nonsense.

So that was my religious experience as I grew up. Then I began to think, and through the educational process, I began to—mainly one of the things that got me to look into and study comparative religions was that I read a book, and I don't recall what the book title was, but basically it asked a question. We're born here in America, okay. We're born here in America; we have certain particular beliefs that are associated with this particular system and society that we live in. And it's primarily here in America, primarily Christianity. Okay, obviously there are some other belief systems, but that's it primarily. So it asked the question: if you were born in Arabia, okay, what would your belief be? How could you be so sure that because you were born in America or even if you were born in Arabia or somewhere else that has a different cultural system and possibly a different, to some degree, religious belief, how could you be so sure that what you believe in is the right thing? You know?

Wilmsen: Yes.

Clark: So I said, "Wow, that makes a whole lot of sense right there." Well, you know, I better start learning about other systems—cultures and beliefs. And I did, and it was quite an experience. In addition to that, also trying to basically understand people and understand what people stand for, you know, with all the divisions and the hate among people, all based on races or beliefs, and people don't want to associate with each other. So when I began to study comparative religions and different cultures—drawing on my background in social science/interdisciplinary studies—I began to find out that really, especially when you're talking about religious beliefs, that there's really, in a sense, not a whole lot of difference—especially on *this* side of the graveyard—in the sense of what people believe, and what they're striving for. You know, it's basically all these are trying to strive for peace, or respecting people, or a better way of life, you know.

The questions that they differ on in many ways—which will probably never be solved in this life—is what lies beyond the graveyard, you know, in terms of whether there's any resurrection of the dead. Some believe that when you die you just go back to the earth that you came from and that's it. Others believe, you know, in some resurrection of the spirit, and some judgment, and if you've been doing some good deeds or been living what is called an upright life according to the scriptures, then you'll be rewarded with some heaven-like conditions on this earth. And then it varies depending upon which denomination you are in. Some say that you'll be rewarded in some way, possibly a better society here on this earth, but if you are one of the chosen few, then you would be in another place, in a heaven somewhere, you know, up there.

But it gave me quite a good understanding to say, those particular issues there are not going to be decided in this life, on this side of the graveyard, as I say. But it certainly gave me some understanding or appreciation where people—especially religious

people—can have some basis of working together in this life because they pretty much believe in a similar type of belief in terms of creating a better world and working for it.

But here again, it's back to the social involvement. I'm definitely a social activist, you know, and I believe that's applied religion in that particular sense. So it gave me more of an appreciation for people of different beliefs. And not only in terms of religion, but like I say, even with my concentration in social science/interdisciplinary studies and looking at different cultures or different world view belief systems, whatever that may be. It give me a greater appreciation for different cultures and people of different belief systems to form some basis of being able to work together with people rather than allowing different beliefs to be a way to separate people.

Wilmsen: Now, you mentioned you've had some exposure to Islam?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: How did that come about?

Clark: Well, you know, that primarily came about through the influence of the sixties, through Malcolm X.

### **An Appreciation for Music, and Reading Socialist Literature**

Wilmsen: Okay. Were there any particular books or music or anything of that nature that was influential on you while you were growing up?

Clark: Well, I was fortunate enough to have a wide range of musical interests. It still is dear to my heart now. Obviously the cultural-related music—you know, the rhythm and blues stuff was part of my culture so that people like James Brown, Aretha Franklin, the Temptations, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, BB King, and Blues, a local guy that grew up in Richmond, Jimmy McCracklin, Bobby Blue Bland. In terms of jazz stuff: Nancy Wilson, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley. In terms of classical stuff: Bach and Beethoven and Tchaikovsky and all those people. And primarily because of the fact that when I was still in elementary school, I had a teacher, and I never will forget her name, her name was Mrs. Vasey, and it was a music appreciation class, and so we went through the range of music. That's probably where I was introduced to classics, as they say.

So when I grew up, I attended a lot of concerts, primarily in San Francisco. At one period of time, just to deepen my appreciation, I used to go to a lot of musicals at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco where a lot more of the people are in it. Operas, like Pippin's Pocket Operas and a lot of the classical performances in Berkeley. I don't recall the name of the church, but there was one particular church there in Berkeley that used to have classical programs quite regularly, so I used to go there in addition to a lot of the rhythm and blues concerts and stuff like that. So I have a wide range of musical experience and appreciation.



Actually when I was going through elementary school, I was taking music. I was playing an instrument, but I got—well, I sort of had a bad experience there, that I didn't really think that was fair under the circumstances.

Wilmsen: What was that?

Clark: Well, you know, I was playing an instrument, okay? I started out playing a French horn. You know, it requires quite a bit of energy to blow a French horn, and so my mother told me that I should probably change over to another instrument, you know, because that probably was too much for a kid to be trying to play. I don't know whether that was true or not, but anyway, I switched over to a trumpet. And I was playing the trumpet, but for some reason, I got the curious idea of how the horn was—you know, the little valves on there were put together. So I unscrewed it, because you could screw it out. But then when I tried to put it back in, it didn't go in right, you know, to play. So obviously the teacher knew it. But I did it again, because that curiosity was so strong. I mean, I was just a kid then. So I was put out of the class or kicked out or whatever term you want to use for that particular experience. I guess—this is all in hindsight now—I could have, if I would have thought of it, maybe just asked the instructor to explain it to me or something, but I was just a kid then, so it just didn't really dawn on me to do that.

Wilmsen: To ask.

Clark: Yes. But I still loved—anyway, so I still had an appreciation for music.

Wilmsen: How about books? Were there any books that you remember?

Clark: Yes, well, I've read a whole lot of books. Let me see, certainly one was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The one book by Dr. Martin Luther King, entitled *Chaos or Community*. Let me see, what's the name of some of the others? Well, I read a lot of books but the ones that were probably more influential are—obviously going to college you read a lot of books. I'm not saying that I didn't get any knowledge or information out of all of them, you know, but just in terms of the impact—let me see. Well, in terms of having some impact on my thinking in that particular sense, to shape and inform me, obviously like I said, I read a lot of books on a lot of cultural stuff, but I read a lot of socialist literature as well: [Vladimir Ilich] Lenin, *The State in Revolution*, or Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*.

Also because of my background in social science/interdisciplinary studies, I did a lot of studying about different cultures. Let me see, I read a book by an African leader during that time, [Kwame] Nkrumah, but I don't recall the name of the book. But in terms of, I guess, social or political ideas, those probably are the major ones. Yes, I would say those are probably all the major ones. I mean, like I said, I read a lot of different type of books, but there's a different character in those which helped me in terms of my educational experience. Well, in terms of that, you know, the Bible, the Holy Koran, you know, so those are it.



**The Social Sciences and Campus Activism at San Francisco State University, 1974-1980**

Wilmsen: Now what did you do after finishing high school?

Clark: After finishing high school, for some brief period I worked some temporary jobs. I worked at a chemical company in Hercules—Hercules Powder Company, as we would call it at that particular time.

Wilmsen: Hercules what company?

Clark: Hercules Powder Company. It was a chemical plant in Hercules. I had some other part-time jobs until I went to college out at Cal Poly for a year, and San Francisco State. Then the recent PhD is from the American College of Metaphysical Theology in Minnesota.

Wilmsen: Now, you've mentioned that your BA is in social sciences and interdisciplinary studies?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: What prompted you to select those as a major?

Clark: The interdisciplinary studies came about because of the fact that, here again, I wanted to know more about disciplines—different cultures. Unfortunately—at least my opinion, unfortunately—the way the educational system is set up, you basically end up focusing on a certain particular discipline or area and you really don't get a broad or interdisciplinary approach. And so when I found out that the interdisciplinary approach would give me actually what I was seeking in terms of understanding different disciplines as well as different cultures, that's primarily the motivation to broaden my awareness and understanding so that it wouldn't just be limited to one particular discipline; it would be more broad.

I remember the professor saying that from the disciplinary approach you just see a tree, but from the interdisciplinary approach, you see the whole forest, and the interrelationship. You see, so you're not limited in that particular sense. Of course, on the other hand, they say that the interdisciplinary approach is like being a jack of all trades and a master of none. However, to counteract that, I basically, through my experience and my studying, I grounded myself in the disciplines more so, so that I would have much in-depth understanding and knowledge and background of the disciplines rather than just have some superficial understanding of any particular one.

Wilmsen: Which social science did you study?

Clark: I studied sociology of the community, psychology, anthropology, social science research—let's see, what were some of the other courses?

Wilmsen: So it was a mix of the social sciences?

- Clark: Yes, it was a whole mix of the social sciences, but it didn't just limit me to the social sciences. Like I said, it was a mix of the sciences because they were trying to make sure that I had a rooting in—well, those were just titles for the particular areas of study. But in my thinking, in terms of the coursework that I was taking, in addition to the direct social science type of stuff, I tried to have a broader base in mathematics, biological sciences, psychology, sociology, anthropology—you know, various social sciences. So that was the motivation behind that, basically, here again, for several reasons to have a greater appreciation, first of all, of myself as a human being in terms of function and operation, but also in terms of understanding different belief systems and societies.
- Wilmsen: What was student life like at San Francisco State in those days? This was the 1970s?
- Clark: Well, when was I there? I always have to reflect on those years when I was there, because I really don't have those particular dates and things handy, in terms of making a quick reference to them. But see, during the later part of the sixties and seventies, there was the—when San Francisco State was going through a lot of student protesting, you know, around the black studies and a lot of the other stuff that was going on during that period of time, that was actually happening around the country. But I wasn't there then, I came there later. Let me fix the exact year I was there. Let's see—around about '76.
- Wilmsen: '76?
- Clark: Yes. '76, because I started work at the Neighborhood House in North Richmond. Let's see, that was from '82 or '85 because I started here with the West County Toxics Coalition in, probably, 1982. Prior to that, I worked five years at the Neighborhood House as a director of the Youth Community Center, and so that was '76 to about 1980. Yes.
- Wilmsen: What was campus like then?
- Clark: Well, actually when I was attending San Francisco State, I didn't actually stay there. When I attended a year at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo I actually stayed at a place called Stenner Glenn, which was student off-site housing. That was quite an interesting experience because that was like a little community within itself: you know, dining room, swimming pool, rec room. Each building had a little government process, like a little council, and I was the president or the chair of the council in the building that I lived in. That was an enjoyable experience. It was probably more ideal to me than staying on campus, but my focus was basically on studying, you know, so—.
- And then at San Francisco State I didn't stay on campus or anything. I was basically going to school daily, and I lived at home. As far as Cal Poly was concerned, there was probably less activism, social activism, out there than at San Francisco State. But even at Cal Poly there were some student-type groups there, but there weren't any during that particular time. There was some type of Afro-American organization, but there weren't really many type of student activist-type groups there that I'm aware of. And at San Francisco State, there were other different activist-type groups.
- Wilmsen: Which ones were you involved in?
- Clark: Well, you know, I really wasn't a member of any of them. But you know, I associated—

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Clark: I can remember there were a lot of different activities that went on around with the student union. They had some good people there that I even remember participating in quite a few marches and rallies on campus there at San Francisco State, which was something that never happened at Cal Poly. Then there was different, you know, political type of forums because you're in a campus in the San Francisco Bay Area, where people are involved in a lot of activism. And they've got a lot of different groups that sponsored different events there at the school, so I attended some of those. I would participate and attend in the different forums, you know, whenever I had the chance to, and some of the different rallies, activities, and marches there on the campus to some degree.

Wilmsen: What were the ones that you participated in? I mean, what were the issues they were addressing?

Clark: Well, I think that it was primarily around educational issues that were happening there at the campus. I think there were some related to issues of police abuse or disrespect of some Afro-American students. Some incidents that occurred there. I should remember the details of it. But I would attend a lot of the different political discussions that go on. But as I recall, I wasn't a member of any particular campus group, but I would participate and attend the activities that were going on, especially if they were interesting—especially if they were, you know, some type of political type of activity or protest or rally.

Obviously on a campus, you know, there's a lot of different forums and so forth—stuff that was related to my particular—well, I guess all of it was related to my educational experience; it's just those were a different type of social protest. Some of that was going on on the campus, which was quite interesting also.

Wilmsen: When did you get your master's degree? Was that on the way to your PhD, or was that—I can't remember what it said on your résumé. Oh, it doesn't give a date. Oh, no, that is San Francisco State, also.

Clark: Yes.

Wilmsen: So what prompted you to then go on to graduate school?

Clark: Well, the same thing. I did want to basically pursue education as far as I could go. Actually I consider education as being a lifetime experience, you know, not only in a formal academic setting, but just pursuing an education for an entire lifetime. So I do have a great appreciation for education.

Of course, unfortunately I do think that the education system has some serious problems that need to be addressed. First of all, I didn't really think that the whole struggle around Afro-American studies or Chicano studies really should have been something that really needed to occur. Basically I feel that the education system should be reflective of the culture of and the contributions of all people that have contributed to society. Unfortunately that wasn't the case in many different ways. Even today it's still not quite the case. I don't feel that the education system really teaches people to actually, in the

final end, be appreciative of other people and cultural groups. In that particular sense, it doesn't really prepare people for the real world that we live in, you know. I mean, if you go up through an educational process and you don't even have an appreciation or respect for other people in the world that you live in and you're going to work in, I think that is quite a failure in the educational system. You know, some people say, "Well, that ain't the place for education. That's for the church or for religion," but I don't think so. Certainly in terms of the contribution, say, that Afro-Americans or Latinos or Asians and other people have made to our country, and to have to basically organize and fight for some black studies or Chicano studies, to try to get some sense of your history and background, I don't think that's really an educational system that's reflective of everyone's contributions. So you know, those are some of the basic issues I have with the education system. But in terms of education per se, that is the lifetime experience.

Wilmsen: What was your master's thesis on?

Clark: It was on unemployment and the effects on the crime rate, suicide rate.

**Neighborhood House and Corporate Influence on Social Service Organizations, 1980-1985**

Wilmsen: Then you mentioned that you worked as the program director for the Neighborhood House in North Richmond.

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: That was after completing your master's?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: How did you get involved in that?

Clark: A guy that I know by the name of Lloyd Madden, who was a friend of mine that I grew up with, was the executive director of the Neighborhood House. He asked me to take on this job as the program director for the Youth Community Center because they had this opening, and so I applied for the job and told them that I would, and I worked there with the youth.

Part of the program was dealing with youth service and activities. The other part was dealing with community issues and working with community organizations that were addressing some community issue.

Wilmsen: And what were the issues?

Clark: Well, you know, I worked with different groups like the Neighborhood Council, which was primarily the group that was active in North Richmond. That was basically a multi-issue organization that was there to address the range of community issues. The board of the center that I was working for was receiving some type of government funds, and



so in order to receive the funds, they had to have—they call it an area council—to oversee those, and so I would work with that group. And to some degree, I worked with the West County Toxics Coalition when it was formed. Of course, [laughs] it was quite strange. Well, it's not really quite strange, if I think about it. When I started working with the West County Toxics Coalition, I began to have some problems because of the fact that the agency was receiving some funds which was only peanuts in my opinion, not a whole lot.

Wilmsen: You mean the West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: No, no, the Neighborhood House.

Wilmsen: Oh, the Neighborhood House, okay.

Clark: Was receiving some funds from Chevron.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay.

Clark: But part of my job was to work with groups that were addressing community issues.

Wilmsen: I see.

Clark: So when West County Toxics Coalition was formed, not only was it just a natural thing because, here again, like anyone born and raised in North Richmond, we know that there are environmental problems there—you know, over your lifetime. It was only logical when the West County Toxics Coalition was formed, they began to organize in North Richmond, primarily. You know: say, "Yes, sure. I would be glad to support that effort." Not only for those reasons, but because of the fact that that was part of my job, to work with community groups.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Clark: But it was quite a different situation when it came to the West County Toxics Coalition because Chevron basically tried to pressure the agency.

Okay, and this was on my own time, but the West County Toxics Coalition took a delegation to Washington, D.C., to testify before the Senate subcommittee hearing on the reauthorization of the Clean Air Act. I went as part of that delegation. Chevron did not quite appreciate the idea. So the executive director of the agency at that time, she told me that she had been approached by this Chevron official—a guy named Hal Holt who was their government affairs guy, you know.

Wilmsen: Hal who?

Clark: Holt. I guess he's retired now; he's been having some health problems. He was telling her that Chevron didn't like the agency allowing the West County Toxics Coalition to use their buildings to hold meetings, nor did they like the idea of Henry Clark leading a struggle against Chevron. And she said that she told him that an employee can do whatever he or she wants to do on their own time, as long as it's not on agency time, which, you know, I wasn't. But that did not quite go over well with the company and so

some strange, peculiar things occurred after that—actually a lot of things you can't prove, but you just have some sneaking suspicion on relationships.

The thing is, is that the agency, or the department of the youth community center that I was working in, was getting funding primarily through the Community Service Department of Contra Costa County. And I do know that at that particular time there was some conflict going on between the Community Service Department and the Neighborhood House, because the lady—named Ida Burke, who was a black lady, Afro-American—who was the head of the Community Service Department—had been having some ongoing struggle or conflict with the Neighborhood House because Ms. Burke wanted certain types of programs at the Neighborhood House, you know, and that stuff was happening too. So anyway, that particular center was supposed to close or—well, it wasn't actually supposed to close, they were considering either closing and restructuring the program, you know, to be more to the liking of the funding source, okay, which may have meant some possible layoffs. But what they said was, that if there were any layoffs that the staff would be shifted to some other part of the agency. But that didn't occur. I was laid off. I was the director of the center. The other two staff people who were—I was their supervisor—they were maintained.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay.

Clark: That all occurred about the same time, so obviously I probably figured that it was possibly to take advantage of an opportunity, you know, because Chevron was applying pressure on the agency or something. But that really didn't bother me. It bothered me in the sense that I do believe that it was unfair. But, I know that in this life many things are not fair.

There are people in agencies that say that they're for working in the community and standing up for justice and all of that; really in the final end, it's not really the case in the more deeper sense because of the fact that—unfortunately, especially with nonprofit groups like that and others—there's some particular type of funding source or somebody wants to apply some pressure on them, you know, they obviously in most cases are going to cave in to that.

But even assuming that that wasn't the case, which I don't believe—I believe that it was—but assuming that it wasn't, the point is still valid that nonprofit groups like that in the community that are supposed to be providing leadership really can't take on the issues. None will because probably in many cases, especially in Richmond, Chevron usually has somebody on their board of directors, or you know, they've given them some money to some degree, and so that's why none of those groups have been able to address these issues over the years.

And if not for West County Toxics Coalition, then it won't be. Those groups are there; there's probably a church on most every corner in North Richmond, or those type of social service type of groups. They've been there; they know the same problems that the community has. Most of them have been born and raised and lived there with them, but you know, they don't speak out against it. They don't do nothing. And the fact is that when they do come out to a meeting, they come out on the side of Chevron.

Wilmsen: Are we okay on time?

Clark: I think I've got a conference call at two o'clock.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay, so we should probably stop there for today.

Clark: Yes, maybe so.





## II THE WORK OF THE WEST COUNTY TOXICS COALITION, 1984-PRESENT

[Interview 2: December 13, 1999] ##

### Early Days at West County Toxics Coalition

Wilmsen: Today is December 13, 1999, and this is the second interview with Henry Clark. Last time we ended up with you talking about how Chevron had made donations to the community house?

Clark: Oh, okay.

Wilmsen: And then you couldn't prove it, but you felt like you were laid off from there because Chevron was applying pressure to them. Then you came over here to the West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: Okay, so my first question today is, I was just curious how you got interested in the links between environmental problems and social justice.

Clark: Okay, well, my interests with the West County Toxics Coalition and environmental issues was, like I said, basically one of being familiar with the chemical exposure issues and the periodic fires and explosions at the refinery growing up as a kid here in North Richmond. So those were particular issues I knew that had to be addressed. It wasn't a big convincing job to convince me to get involved with the West County Toxics Coalition to address those issues.

Basically the issues of environmental justice are issues relating to social justice issues because their root is the same in that low income, black communities, or communities of color, where there's high unemployment rates, where there's lack of political power, and crime and violence and other problems, you know, are the same communities that

have disproportionate impact from siting of dumps, hazardous waste facilities, chemical companies. The issues are all related in that the base of it is the lack of power and influence that those communities with those type of problems experience.

Wilmsen: How did you hear about the West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: The organizer approached me. The original guy who was the organizer named Craig Williams, who was sent out from Boston, Massachusetts, on the National Toxics Campaign, began to organize here. He approached anyone when he was organizing in the community. Actually, the community people referred him to contact me.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. How did you get hired on as the executive director?

Clark: Well, I started out as a volunteer board member for the year, and then I started doing some work with the organization when I was laid off from the Neighborhood House as the youth community director of that center. Craig, the original organizer of the West County Toxics Coalition, his job was primarily to come to California, come to Richmond, and build an organization and train some native leadership. And that's what he did. So after he had pretty much laid the foundation, they were interested in hiring someone locally, and you know, I was the person.

Wilmsen: Then, can you tell me about the first campaign that you were involved in? You mentioned on the phone a campaign to stop the hazardous waste incinerator near an elementary school.

Clark: Well, the first campaign that the West County Toxics Coalition was involved in was the waste-to-energy plant—or the burn plant, as it was called. It was basically an incinerator that was being proposed by various agencies—the Waste Water Treatment District and the Richmond Sanitary Service—to burn municipal garbage, incinerate municipal garbage, and in the process generate electricity that would be sold to the local power company—PG&E. And the incinerator was proposed to be located near Verde Elementary School in North Richmond, which was not a good site for that project.

Wilmsen: What did the West County Toxics Coalition do to oppose it?

Clark: Well, the West County Toxics Coalition primarily attended community meetings, public meetings, and hearings on the project. You know, I actually advocated in the community—held community meetings, doing public education in the North Richmond area, around the project.

Wilmsen: Did you do any community organizing for that particular campaign?

Clark: No, basically at that particular point, that was one of the first projects that the organization got involved in. I basically attended some public meetings on that particular project. No, I didn't.

Wilmsen: What was the outcome?

Clark: Well, the incinerator project, because of widespread opposition to it, was basically abandoned. The project idea was abandoned, so the community won a victory on that.

Wilmsen: And did you make some useful contacts in that with people in the city government or county government or anything like that?

Clark: Not directly. I didn't specifically. Not at that particular project, personally. As I said, that was in the early days of the organization. Actually, when I came on board, that particular project was pretty much at its end state in terms of that. I attended some community meetings, some meetings that were held, and public hearings on that, but I really personally didn't do a lot of organizing around that particular project.

### **Organizing Campaigns Dealing with Chevron Oil Refinery Impacts on the Community**

Wilmsen: I see. Tell me about organizing around Chevron?

Clark: Well, you know, organizing around Chevron, basically I've been organizing door-to-door in the surrounding communities—in North Richmond, Parchester Village, the central Richmond area, actually throughout the city here and San Pablo—throughout the area—holding community meetings, talking to elected officials. I've given presentations at churches, but primarily going door-to-door in the neighborhoods, passing out literature and meeting with people, holding house meetings, basically educating people, doing environmental education around these particular issues.

The organizing is primarily related to certain types of projects. There has been organizing to stop the expansion of the Chevron hazardous waste incinerator at the Chevron Ortho Chemical Company, their pesticide division, or it may have been organizing the community to attend a community meeting after a chemical release or chemical accident at the Chevron refinery. We called a community meeting to assess what had actually occurred and how the community was impacted. The meetings have been primarily around different activities: whether Chevron was trying to get a permit to do their reformulated fuel project, or you know, some expansions at the refinery or after some chemical release, like I said. So the organizing around Chevron issues are primarily related to some particular chemical disaster or the incinerator or some particular project that the company was engaging in.

Wilmsen: And how did the community respond?

Clark: Well, you know, the community responds better after a chemical release because people are concerned about the health-related issues. Also, they're concerned about filing lawsuits, and so you always get a good response after a particular chemical release or emergency. Usually we get a good response at the community meetings. Here again, especially if it's after a chemical disaster or something relating to the meeting—maybe relating to an update on the lawsuit or follow-up meeting on some type of problem or situation that has occurred—we probably get more of a response.

But the problems as relating to the organizing is getting people to actually be involved or to sign up as a member of the organization, because our purpose is not just to educate

people or hold meetings, but it's to build an organization and get people to become members of the organization.

Wilmsen: What works to get people interested in actually becoming part of the organization?

Clark: Well, the door-to-door, basically, is a one-on-one situation, you know. We're talking to people door-to-door, or at community meetings or churches, and asking people to join on to the organization. But it's primarily in one-on-one type of situations where you sense peoples' concerns and ask them are they willing to join an organization of residents like themselves to do something about these issues and concerns that they've expressed that are a concern for them.

Wilmsen: When you want people to join, do you mean paying dues and coming to rallies and coming to meetings? Or all of the above?

Clark: Some of all of that, yes. The membership is only five dollars a year, at this particular point, you know, which is a drop in the bucket. Yes, they have some type of membership fee structure, but when a person joins the organization, it means simply them maybe holding a house meeting, if they're comfortable with that—inviting their neighbors or family members to a meeting where they talk to them about the issues and concerns. Or it means, you know, being on alert to attend rallies, meetings, protests, hearings on issues, or projects that come up—maybe writing their elected official a letter, or a phone call, or all of the above.

Wilmsen: Now, it seems to me like probably you get a certain core of people who are going to be interested in doing those things and then you might have other members who just pay their dues and don't really get active in any other way, and then you've got other people who don't join at all but maybe support you. So with that core, if—I don't know what the numbers of people we're talking about here are, but if you have the same people showing up to, say, testify at meetings, public hearings, and things like that, do you think that diminishes the impact in the eyes of public officials? Do you see what I mean?

Clark: No, I understand what you're saying. Well, you know, usually there may be some particular core of people, but usually it probably would not just be the same people. If there's some public meeting or hearing or something, what we would have done was to do some organizing and outreach to people: passing out fliers or going into neighborhoods, shopping malls, and places, talking to people, probably having a petition people would sign, calling and following up and calling those people for this particular meeting or hearing. And so whereas they may see or hear some particular core people because those core people may be myself or some board members or members of the organization, there would be a lot of other people there that would be from the community.

Wilmsen: Tell me about the campaign against the Chevron's Ortho incinerator.

Clark: Well, that campaign was linked to the Chevron Ortho Chemical Company incinerator that had been operating since, I believe, 1967 on a temporary permit. Chevron was in the process of getting a permit to expand the hazardous waste that was being burned in the incinerator probably from maybe forty tons, which was actual waste that they were



burning, they wanted to get a permit to expand up to probably 120,000-some tons. And the West County Toxics Coalition felt that the company should not get a permit to expand their waste burning. In fact, they should actually decrease the waste that was being incinerated.

And so we organized a campaign to do public education, having the community sign postcards opposing the expansion of the incinerator. We actually took some community leaders and residents to the Department of Toxic Substance Control office which was the lead agency on the permitting process. We took leaders and the signed 1,200 postcards of leaders and residents of the community to the Department of Toxic Substance Control office in Berkeley, and requested that they hear the community's concern not to expand the incinerator operations.

About two weeks after that, we received word that Chevron was withdrawing their permit application to expand the incinerator, and that the incinerator was going to be closing down due to some business decisions that Chevron was making about getting out of the chemical production business, as well as due to the community's concerns about health and safety issues. The company felt that for a combination of all those reasons that they would close the incinerator down, and so the incinerator has been closed and dismantled as of June of 1997.

Wilmsen: So it took a while, because your campaign was back in the early nineties, wasn't it?

Clark: Well, actually we were opposed to the incinerator even from when the West County Toxics Coalition was formed in the year 1984, around that time, but the organizing around the campaign in a major way probably just really intensified in about '95 because that was during the time that the company was actually going through the process of trying to get a permit for expansion. So we intensified our organizing effort during that time, whereas all the time we were concerned about the incinerator, you know. But in a more organized way, we began to organize to oppose the incinerator during that time. Probably from 1995 or so.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Then you mentioned several other issues around Chevron. There were some hazardous spills?

Clark: There's been a lot of chemical releases over the years going back to 1989: December 5, 1991; just recently, March 25 of 1999; some others. Those are some of the major ones that stand out over the years.

Wilmsen: And what about water quality issues?

Clark: The water issues are primarily from the refinery there. Now there was some concern with selenium discharges, but Chevron reduced their selenium discharges and brought them relatively down. But our major concern with the water discharge pollutants was dioxins. Dioxin pollutants go into the bay water. The Chevron position is that they only release a small amount of dioxins into the bay waters, which they say it's not a major concern to them. In fact, because of the fact that they produce and discharge those small amounts of dioxins, they feel that West County Toxics Coalition should probably be going after the diesel trucks or other sources that they say is more of a major polluter

than the refinery. But the water discharge is primarily a concern with the dioxin discharges.

### **Bringing Chevron to the Negotiating Table**

Wilmsen: Now part of what you were trying to win is the right to negotiate with Chevron officials? Is that right?

Clark: Well, that was what we wanted to do initially when the organization started, as indicated when Chevron refused to have any type of formal contact with the organization, or refused to negotiate with us until after April of 1990.

Wilmsen: What finally brought them to the negotiating table?

Clark: On April 1, 1990, the West County Toxics Coalition had an Earth Day event in North Richmond commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day. We brought Reverend Jesse Jackson to Richmond as the keynote speaker at our Earth Day program; Dennis Hayes, one of the founders and organizers of the first Earth Day; Johnny O'Connor from the National Toxics Campaign, and some others. And Chevron was invited to participate in the program because we thought maybe they would want to take advantage of the good publicity, and agree to begin to have discussions with us around the health and safety issues, which they refused to do, even though they did send a film crew to film the event.

Later in April—at the time I was a board member of Communities for a Better Environment [CBE] based in San Francisco—CBE was meeting with Chevron officials around possible Proposition 65 violations of the Chevron Ortho Chemical Company in North Richmond related to not informing the community about methylene chloride emissions and exposure from the incinerator. At that meeting there was an attorney on Chevron's staff at the corporate headquarters in San Francisco named Jerry Ross, who expressed interest in getting West County Toxics Coalition and Chevron to come together—

Wilmsen: This was a Chevron attorney?

Clark: Yes, he was formerly with Gulf Oil Company that Chevron had just recently bought out. So with the influence of attorney Jerry Ross, and the influence that Reverend Jackson and the other national leaders brought to bear when they came to Richmond in the month of April in 1990 for the twentieth anniversary Earth Day celebration—maybe the combination of all those events influenced Chevron to agree to begin discussions with the West County Toxics Coalition on health and safety issues.

Wilmsen: Can you tell me what all happened when you started meeting with Chevron officials?

Clark: The first meeting, when they finally agreed to begin negotiating, Reverend Jackson came back to Richmond to chair that first negotiating meeting with us. That meeting was held down in City Hall in Richmond. Basically Chevron's position was that if we



were out to close them down, then there was nothing to negotiate, which was not our position. West County Toxics Coalition's position was that if Chevron was not willing to negotiate in good faith and come to some agreement on our issues, then there really was nothing for us to discuss. That was pretty much the summary of the first meeting.

Then after that we continued to have meetings with them. The first thing that the company agreed to do was to relocate some ammonia storage tanks to a further remote location on the refinery property away from the North Richmond community. That was the first thing the company agreed to do. That was the first thing that the company actually agreed to by just face-to-face negotiations. I mean, there were some other things that the company finally did that were beneficial to the community, but that was more through, you know, the public hearing process rather than just sitting down at the table and negotiating in good faith as a good neighbor.

Wilmsen: Did you talk with the Chevron officials about actually making arrangements so that the company would be held more accountable to the community?

Clark: Actually, no. The company basically, in their way of establishing more communications with the community, formed a community advisory panel—what is called a CAP—that consists of community representatives from the surrounding community that meet with the company on a monthly basis to discuss issues and concerns and any other issue that relates to what the West County Toxics Coalition has that we feel that we want to discuss with the company directly. Then we would contact company officials to set up a meeting to discuss those issues, separate from the community advisory panel.

Wilmsen: So this community advisory panel, was that in place before you started negotiating?

Clark: No, that was put in place later, basically after West County Toxics Coalition started organizing. This was the company's means of reaching out to try to communicate with the community more.

Wilmsen: Do you feel that it's an effective way to communicate?

Clark: Well, it's been an effective way to get information about the company's operation and to discuss issues. So it's useful in that particular context. I don't know of anything major—well, certainly information and awareness. Communication is important within itself, but at this particular point, I don't think that anything major has really—other than those things—come out of those meetings.

Wilmsen: Who picks who's going to serve on the community advisory panel?

Clark: Right now, the process would be primarily the panel itself. Initially it was the Neighborhood Council, the Richmond Coordinating Council, which is the council that coordinates all the neighborhood councils in Richmond, that primarily selected the representatives, because most of the people on there are from various neighborhood councils. The West County Toxics Coalition is probably the only independent organization that is not a neighborhood council group that's on there.

Wilmsen: I see.

Clark: Because of our role in terms of, you know, being an environmental justice organization that was organizing around all these issues initially.

**Little Assistance from Labor Unions and Environmental Groups on the Chevron Campaign**

Wilmsen: Did you have any assistance from labor unions in negotiating with Chevron?

Clark: No, we have not actually had any really good cooperative relationship with the labor unions, although we had meetings with the labor unions to express our concerns to them that we're not out to close companies down or cause workers to lose their jobs. We haven't actually been so successful with the labor unions. We probably had more of a working relationship with the building and construction trade unions more so than with the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, the major union there that represented the workers.

Wilmsen: At Chevron?

Clark: Well, yes.

Wilmsen: Why do you think it is that you haven't been able to work with them so well?

Clark: Primarily because of the fact that, here again, most of the unions are pretty much aligned with the company. You know, it's jobs issues and they haven't seemed to grasp the community's concerns. They pretty much align with the company.

Wilmsen: What about in the rank and file, the people working at Chevron? A lot of them, I would assume, are community members themselves.

Clark: Well, they're actually not. There are very few people from the surrounding community that live around the refinery who are actually employed there. Only about 5 percent of the workforce even live in the city of Richmond, out of approximately 1,300 permanent employees. So it's really not that many people from the city of Richmond that even works there. Very few residents from the surrounding community who are affected by the daily operations and the periodic fires and explosions are employed there.

Wilmsen: Where do the people live who work there?

Clark: They come from all over, outside the community. Probably—I mean, who knows, but from other parts of the county, you know. But they don't live in Richmond.

Wilmsen: Why are there so few community people who work there?

Clark: That's a good question. You know, in terms of the community, the people that live around the community, primarily you're talking about a low-income, Afro-American community. In North Richmond there probably is no recruitment. Those are probably union type of jobs, and many people in the surrounding communities where there's a

high unemployment rate, are not in the unions. And there's not a lot of recruitment that happens in those communities for trying to incorporate them into the unions that work out there to represent the workers. Some of those reasons.

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Wilmsen: Does Chevron have a workforce that's representative of the general population at large, in terms of racial and ethnic makeup?

Clark: Well, they have some black workers there, but I don't think that it's representative, or reflects the composition of the surrounding communities. Certainly not in terms of any percentages of the people that live in the communities as compared to the workforce there. No.

Wilmsen: Now in your campaigns on various issues with Chevron, did you get the support of any other environmental groups?

Clark: Yes, we've worked mostly with Communities for a Better Environment, APEN (the Asian Pacific Environmental Network), the Golden Gate University Environmental Justice Law Clinic, Berkeley's Environmental Justice Law Clinic associated with Boalt Hall—it's closed down now, but when it was open. Let's see—

Wilmsen: How about the Sierra Club or any of the mainstream groups?

Clark: Well, not actually, no. No.

Wilmsen: Or Greenpeace?

Clark: Greenpeace at one point, when it was more actively involved in those issues, but not now. Initially yes, but Greenpeace has changed their priorities, so Greenpeace is not into toxics, or supporting environmental justice in this area anymore. They still are doing some work in the Louisiana area, but here in California and other areas they've pretty much pulled out of this type of environmental justice work. But at that particular time they did. So yes, they did contribute and worked with us at the time that they were involved in this type of work, yes.

Wilmsen: Did you approach the other groups, like the Sierra Club and Audubon Society or any of those groups, and ask them for assistance?

Clark: Well, no, we didn't actually approach them; we approached, I guess, the local Sierra Club official. There was an individual that was—I gave a presentation to the Richmond branch of the Sierra Club. At one point there was a person who was associated with the Sierra Club that was working with us, but as an organization the Sierra Club was not involved in these issues, so we did not—so that was the extent of it. We did on different occasions give presentations before the Sierra Club.

Wilmsen: Who was the local Sierra Club person?

Clark: At the time it was Mark Mason.

So that was pretty much it. The other groups were not involved, nor did we approach them. As for the big ten, as they were called—the major environmental groups—they have basically, you know, not been involved. Environmental justice was not the area that they were focusing on.

Wilmsen: How did you feel about it at the time?

Clark: I didn't feel quite good about it. I mean, basically I felt that they were not addressing those particular issues, simply because of the fact that for many reasons they did not want to rock the boat, that they were maybe even possibly getting funding from corporations. They didn't want it relating to their funding, or they didn't want to be perceived as, you know, rock-the-boat type of organizations. So they basically stayed away from the environmental justice or issues that impacted communities of color, low-income communities, the issues that the West County Toxics Coalition was addressing, because that involves community organizing, that involves demonstrations, and protesting. That wasn't the type of work that these other major organizations do.

Wilmsen: Now it seems to me like the so-called big ten and other environmental groups like that do a lot of kind of lobbying and legislative work on the state or federal level. Have you done any of that kind of work?

Clark: We've done some to some degree, but primarily we don't. There are other groups that do that type of work, you know. Where it relates to some issues and concerns that we can support, we would be supportive of it, but we don't primarily focus in that area.

Wilmsen: What are some of the other groups that do that? You mean environmental justice groups?

Clark: Well, no, I mean, you mentioned groups that focus on the legislative stuff that are lobbying Congress or the state legislature. There are groups of people that do that type of work, like maybe the Sierra Club or like maybe the other major environmental groups—the big ten. Whereas we would certainly support any type of legislation or measure that would be protective of the environment and public health and safety, we—well, you know, first of all, there's only a certain degree of time and resources that a nonprofit group can allot to lobbying, even if you called it that, or even if you called it something else like community education. Still, there's only a certain amount of time and energy that groups like ours who are dealing in day-to-day issues in a community can do in terms of dealing with officials in Sacramento or attending hearings in Sacramento.

First of all, it requires a resource question. You're dealing with the issues in legislation in Sacramento; it's even much more difficult if you're talking about legislation in Washington, D.C. You know, these major organizations have people, lobbyists and people, in Sacramento or D.C., or they can send people there to testify at hearings and so forth. It's very difficult for community nonprofit groups or community-based environmental justice groups to even get people to city hall, let alone to Sacramento.

Of course we have done so. Over the years we have taken people to Sacramento to testify at various hearings, and I have been part of a delegation that went to Washington, D.C., to testify before the Senate subcommittee hearing on the Clean Air Act. But by



and large, other major groups that focus on those type of activities usually end up shaping legislation, but grassroots-based environmental justice organizations usually do not have any input into the shaping of any type of environmental legislation.

### **Working with Government Agencies, and the Role of Lawsuits**

Wilmsen: What about working with the executive branch, like agencies like the EPA—and what else would there be? The EPA, I guess.

Clark: Well, you know, we work with the EPA and the regulatory agencies all the time on projects that are proposed for our community, but those have probably been more in an adversarial way because we usually feel that the EPA and the regulatory agencies usually just rubberstamp projects that come before them and they really are not sensitive to the issues and concerns of the residents in our community. So it's probably more of what would be considered an adversarial way, where we either have a protest at the EPA's headquarters in San Francisco or some regulatory agency, or you know, putting them on the carpet, or complaining about their particular activities at some community meeting or public hearing, because we figure that they've taken the wrong position.

Wilmsen: Are there any particular people in the EPA, for example, that have been particularly helpful?

Clark: Well, you know, sometimes there is. The president at the EPA administrative region nine, Felicia Marcus, has been supportive on occasions. A few individuals appear at different occasions, like Keith Takata in region nine. It probably depends on, you know, project by project, what the particular issue and concern is, whether you may get some support or not, but by and large, the agency is not perceived as an environmental protection agency to us. It is basically, again, perceived as an agency that really has not been protecting the environment, nor public health and safety, by and large.

Wilmsen: What do you think could make them more accountable to the community?

Clark: Well, that's a good question. Certainly, the communities holding the agencies accountable to make decisions and operate more fairly and in a more balanced way. We figure that because the companies have been working with these agencies for so long that they probably have been able to manipulate the process. And the agencies just seem to have a more business orientation than an orientation toward protecting the environment and protecting communities. With the federal agencies, they are basically federally mandated, and so it's sort of difficult there, because they don't really respond to community pressure. If there were more local control over these agencies, if these agencies were, say, city agencies, or county agencies where people could, you know, basically either organize to hold the elected officials accountable that have jurisdiction over these agencies, then people would probably have more accountability. But in many cases, you know, these agencies are either federal or state agencies and quite divorced from any type of local influence that community residences may be able to have on them.

Wilmsen: How would you describe the relationship between West County Toxics Coalition and county officials?

Clark: First of all, we kind of think that the relationship is—some are better than others, you know. Usually the situation is that you may have one or two people on the board of supervisors or the city councils in your city that may be more environmentally inclined or supportive than others. But by and large, over the years, you know, the elected officials on city and county level have been not as supportive as probably we would have liked to have seen. We probably got more done, rather than through the elected officials, just organizing the community and negotiating agreements or conditions on projects with the companies directly than through the elected officials acting on our behalf and being proactive.

Wilmsen: What incentive does the company have to do the things that you ask it to do?

Clark: The only incentive is that, say, for instance, there's a situation where they are trying to get a permit for a project, you know, and it may be that the project may be held up in court or there's a lot of community opposition created about the project. That's pretty much the leverage points.

Wilmsen: What role have lawsuits played in the overall strategy in dealing with Chevron and other companies like that?

Clark: Lawsuits play a major role. Just having the legal backing or legal threat have helped companies to come around to negotiate some type of agreements on projects with us because they know that they don't want to go through a long drawn-out court process. So just having the legal leverage there—but we've probably been more involved with lawyers on class action suits, or trying to get something remedied for relief or compensation for residents that have been exposed to some chemical disasters or something. That's been helpful.

Now of course the payments on those is quite small, so it's only really peanuts, and not what people actually think that they deserve as compensation. But probably what's coming out of that process—especially if the case goes through court for any hearings, you know—you probably can get a lot of information and learn more about the company's operations, you know. Basically having the threat of the lawsuit or legal action has probably been the most effective tool. In some cases they may have to actually go to court, but the legal tool is a useful one and very powerful one to use because companies don't want their projects held up in court.

Wilmsen: Do you have lawyers on staff here?

Clark: No, we don't have lawyers on staff. Communities for a Better Environment does have lawyers on staff and we have worked with them to use their legal resources. We've worked with the Golden Gate University Environmental Justice Law Clinic and the Boalt Hall Environmental Justice Law Clinic—and to some degree, the California Rural Legal Assistance.

Wilmsen: Oh, yes, Luke—I know who you mean, yes.



- Clark: Yes, Luke Cole. They basically have been our legal resources.
- Wilmsen: So the settlements amount to peanuts for individuals, but if you get a lot of individuals, it could amount to kind of a big chunk for the company, can't it?
- Clark: Sure, it can amount to a lot for the company, but you know, whether that's really a large amount in terms of the scheme of things, the profits that they make, and I'm sure with the insurance they probably have to cover it, it probably doesn't amount to a whole lot in that regard. I mean, that's what insurance is for. That's probably what they end up—but but for the community, it's very little. I'm not aware that any oil company has been bankrupted on those cases.

### **A Lawsuit over the General Chemical Company Sulfuric Acid Release of 1993**

- Wilmsen: Can you give an example of a lawsuit that was particularly helpful or that was a particularly strategic one for the West County Toxics Coalition?
- Clark: Well, we haven't actually directly, as an organization, filed any lawsuits. Like I said, we don't have attorneys on staff. But probably the largest major, class action suit that was settled that was against a company was the—
- Wilmsen: This is Chevron?
- Clark: No, it was the General Chemical Company, after the General Chemical sulfuric acid release on July 26 of '93 that sent over 20,000 people to local hospitals. I think that class action suit may have been about \$180 million, or something like that. I believe that was roughly the amount, but you know, here again, the attorneys that were involved took the lion's share of the settlement. Like on most cases, the attorneys, they take the lion's share. They not only get their legal expenses and all that, but they end up getting about 33 percent or higher of what each individual that they are representing gets. So you know, in these lawsuits, on the average, you're lucky to get \$1,000. If you have some special circumstances, you may get more, but there's usually not that large amount of money that the individual gets. You know, you're lucky to get—if you got \$1,000 you probably would consider that as quite a large amount under the circumstances for one of these class action suits.
- Wilmsen: Yes, can you give me a little more background on that particular chemical spill? That was sulfuric acid?
- Clark: Well, what happened on that was General Chemical Company is the company located next to the Chevron refinery and their specialty is processing sulfuric acid into electronic grade sulfuric acid for use in the electronic industry. They had some huge storage tanks that they stored the oleum, which is concentrated sulfuric acid, in. Their workers were doing some maintenance work on the storage tanks, so they had to unload the storage tanks and transfer the oleum into railcars while they were doing the maintenance. After the maintenance occurred, they then had to retransfer the oleum out of the railcars back into the storage tanks. In order to do that, the railcars had to be

heated because the oleum is like a syrupy substance at room temperature. So the workers were applying steam to the railcar and the railcar overheated, the release valve blew open, and the concentrated sulfuric acid was released to the atmosphere, where it formed the sulfuric acid mist that rained down over the region.

About 20,000 people went to the local hospitals on that date. The district attorney's office of Contra Costa County investigated the incident and it was found that General Chemical Company did not have the proper permits from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to be engaging in that type of loading and unloading operation, and so the district attorney was considering filing criminal charges against the company. A deal was cut. I think the company ended up paying about \$1.8 million in fines and penalties to the county district attorney's office, which most of the money, after paying the expenses of the district attorney office and the county, the remaining amount of money was returned to the community to build a health center.

Wilmsen: What role did West County Toxics Coalition play in that?

Clark: West County Toxics Coalition played the role of community education; we organized community meetings where officials from General Chemical Company came out to address the community's concerns about what happened. An accident occurred, what they were going to do to prevent others?

And we also then were one of the main organizations that was advocating over the years that fine money come back to the community for environmental health and education. That's why we have a permanent seat on the board of directors of the health center.

Even after the chemical disaster had occurred, and the attorneys and people who signed up for the class action suit basically disappeared, we continued to work with the company to prevent the causes of the accident from occurring again. The company came up with what they call the Oleum Reduction Project, where they would not basically store the concentrated sulfuric acid in these huge containers anymore. They would still be using oleum, or concentrated sulfuric acid, there, but it would be in the process, or in the loop as they say. They would have it back in the pipes or in the process and use only what they needed to rather than just having it stored in the huge storage tanks like that where it could pose some possibility of leaking or spilling and infecting the community again.

Wilmsen: Where do they store it now?

Clark: Well, it's not actually stored there at the facility. Here again, it's like I said, it's just used in the loop, so it probably ends up being a more efficient type of use, rather than having it in a big storage tank here. You just have it in the process, like in the loop, as they say, so that you don't need to dip into the tank when you use it. So they basically only use what they need to use because they get the sulfuric acid piped in from the Chevron refinery.

See, the Chevron refinery does the processing of all of the sulfuric acid that is produced. That is a by-product of the refining process, and the sulfuric acid is then piped over to General Chemical Company. They then just process it further into electronic grade sulfuric acid.

- Wilmsen: Did they speed up their processing, or what happens if they have an excess amount coming from Chevron?
- Clark: No, they still have some tanks there, I guess, for sulfuric acid, but in terms of the oleum, the concentrated sulfuric acid, that caused the problem there, they don't store that there like they did.
- Wilmsen: I see. Can you describe how you approached the company officials—General Chemical Company officials—after that accident to get them to start working on prevention?
- Clark: We basically approached them by inviting them to a community meeting to talk to us. And they were, you know, people that pretty much hadn't had any accidents or problems before that particular chemical release, and so they were pretty much receptive to work with our organization and the community, because they acknowledged the fact that they had had the problem, and it was not their desire to do so. They wanted to prevent accidents from occurring. So their attitude in terms of wanting to work with the community and prevent accidents was one of cooperation and receptivity.
- Wilmsen: Is that unusual or is that more the norm?
- Clark: Well, that was quite unusual for that particular company. As a matter of fact, they were quite willing to work with us to prevent accidents and so that was unusual.

### **Exxon Valdez, Chevron, Dioxin and the Clean Water Act**

- Wilmsen: Okay, now, what impact, if any, did the Exxon Valdez accident have on your activities?
- Clark: That really didn't have any bearing on our activities. I guess not directly, anyway. It probably made the public more conscious of the threats to the environment, you know, from oil spills and chemical disasters, but I wouldn't say that it had any major effect on our work here in Richmond or West County, because we've had our own accidents here that made people sensitive to the issues and concerns.
- Wilmsen: What have been the major outcomes of your negotiations with Chevron? You've mentioned that some ammonia storage tanks were relocated.
- Clark: Right. The ammonia storage tanks were relocated. The incinerator was finally closed. Of course, you know, that was a result of a lot of business decisions the company made as well as community pressure, but it wasn't directly as a result of community pressure.
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- Clark: That probably was the major thing, right there, you know. I guess there was some other things, too, but I sort of draw the line between the relocation of the ammonia storage tanks, because that was the direct result of negotiations between the company and the West County Toxics Coalition. The closing of the incinerator, and the agreements that



we reached around the reformulated fuel project that ultimately resulted in zero net increase in emissions was due to discussions with the company, as well as, you know, a lot of backward and forward discussions before the regulatory agencies of the Richmond City Council. So whereas in the final end the project resulted in favorable project conditions for us, really it wasn't of the nature of direct negotiations where we had sat down with the company and they had agreed to do something like relocating the ammonia storage tanks. It was sort of a different process in which those other accomplishments occurred.

Wilmsen: Have there been lawsuits based on, say, the Clean Air Act or the Clean Water Act to get the companies to come more into compliance, or are they basically in compliance with those acts?

Clark: Well, no, no. There actually have not. No, we haven't actually filed any particular lawsuits. No, the only thing that probably was similar to that is that on our concerns about dioxin discharges from the refinery, that we finally got the EPA to agree to—well, that's sort of different. No, there's not been any action against the companies—Chevron or any companies—in terms of any type of litigation under the Clean Air and Water Acts.

What I was going to say was that we had attempted to get Chevron to agree on their own to phase out dioxin discharges from the refinery. That did not occur. Then we went before the Regional Water Board to get the water board to classify dioxins as a high priority for cleanup under section 303-D, I believe, of the Clean Water Act, but they did not do so. And so we petitioned the EPA to do so, and the EPA finally did classify dioxins as a high priority pollutant for cleanup under section 303-D of the Clean Water Act.

And we still are working on that now, since the EPA supposedly is developing some guidelines to address the issue of what is acceptable levels of dioxin. Actually they just recently—well, that's what they were doing at first, but about a month ago the EPA finally said that they were in support of zero dioxin discharge. So we have not actually had to—or we have not taken a company to court under the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, any other particular act at this present time.

Wilmsen: Do you think those acts are adequate?

Clark: Well, you know, that's something that we have to explore. The closest we've come directly to looking at the act, or other environmental laws, is in terms of the dioxin discharges and trying to get the dioxins classified as a high priority for cleanup under the Clean Water Act. That's probably the furthest we've traveled down that road. It may be that, you know, we need to look at those acts to see whatever leverage that we possibly could gain from their use, but we've not explored that particular approach because, here again, we don't have a legal staff to, or the luxury of just pursuing that or looking at it from that standpoint. When we utilize the legal resources and support from our allies, it has been particularly on a project-by-project type of basis.

**A Community Early Warning System, and the Difficulties of Organizing**

Wilmsen: Now, there was something I read about in the newspaper clippings and some of the materials you gave me talking about a community early warning system?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: What is that?

Clark: Basically the community early warning system is some type of method or system where residents could be warned when there is a chemical release or a disaster that's occurring. The system that's in place now is that when there's a chemical release or disaster, residents would receive a recorded message by phone indicating that there was some emergency or problem at whatever the facility. Usually the message would be shelter in place, meaning you go in your house or business and close up all ventilation and wait until you get another message indicating that it's all clear to come out. Sirens have been added to that system since the July 26, '93 General Chemical sulfuric acid disaster. So the sirens would be sounded if there's an emergency, and the residents would also receive a recorded message by phone. That's the community alert system or network that's in place to alert residents when there's a chemical disaster.

Wilmsen: That was put in place after that General Chemical Company accident?

Clark: The sirens were put in place after that. The phone system was in place before that, but there was no system in place when the West County Toxics Coalition first started. We advocated for the implementation of that system.

Wilmsen: Who funds it?

Clark: It has been funded primarily through industry. The system is in the process now of being turned over to the county for operation.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. It would become funded by the taxpayers, then.

Clark: Industry probably would be involved in the funding of the system to some extent, but it would basically be the county's responsibility to operate it, you know, whereas now it's primarily operated by industry.

Wilmsen: Are radio broadcasts included in that?

Clark: Yes, there's radio broadcasts, and TV stations would be notified.

Wilmsen: Yes, that sounds similar to the kind of community warning systems that have been in place—so Richmond didn't have anything like that? Like, for example, I grew up in Tucson and there's a major air force base there, so when I was growing up, they had sirens. That was during the, you know, Cold War, so every Saturday afternoon, the sirens would go off as a test. And you knew that there was this warning system in place, but that was because there was an air force base there.



Clark: Right. Well, you know, there used to be sirens. There used to be such a system—siren system—when I was growing up as a kid. I remember hearing them. Like you said, that was during the Cold War, for those particular purposes, but that was no longer in existence.

Wilmsen: Okay. Has that system ever been used since it was put in place?

Clark: It has been used quite a few times. There's still problems with the system. The problem with the phone system is that in many cases, the areas that are supposed to be warned are dialed up and many people may not—in certain areas it may not work. You know, they may not be dialed, or some area that was not supposed to be dialed may be dialed. There have been some problems of sabotage of the system, where it didn't work, or just problems with employees tampering with the system, on one occasion, and it didn't work. So there have been problems with the system; the system is still being perfected.

Wilmsen: I see. Overall, what were the organizing lessons that you learned from your experiences with Chevron?

Clark: The organizing lesson is primarily that it's very difficult work, you know. The companies have pretty much a stranglehold on the regulatory agencies and the elected officials, and it's an uphill battle in terms of organizing because people are intimidated and overwhelmed with many other problems—the whole struggle to just try to survive and live, and other community issues.

It's just a situation where it's really not rewarding. It's not a rewarding type of work in the sense of pay is not rewarding, in terms of just public response; it's not rewarding, in terms of the rapidness of the change. But it is rewarding in the sense that it's pioneering work. What accomplishment that you do make is certainly pioneering, and historic. So I guess probably as in any type of pioneering work, the pioneers end up bearing the brunt of the hardships and the difficulties. And so this particular line of work, you know, that's what it is: a pioneering field. Of course you have to be aware that when you go into this type of work, or especially if you do any type of pioneering work, that you are basically paving the way and so there's a lot of stress and strains and hardships.

But the rewards are great, not only in terms of the accomplishments, but in making a difference, because you're pretty much setting up a process for changes that, you know, are there. For instance, like the siren system, because nothing was in place before we started, it sort of feels good to hear the sirens go off, be tested the first Wednesday of each month, and to know that you played some role in making that happen. And to see that the incinerator that had been up there, a major incinerator that had been spewing toxics over the region since 1967, is no longer there, period. It's been dismantled. And there are many other accomplishments that we have made. To see the health center being there in North Richmond, providing health services and environmental outreach and education to the community. You know, to be associated with making that happen, or to have a permanent seat on the board of directors because of your role in making that happen. All of that, here again, is pioneering work. But you know, as I said, when you're doing pioneering work, you experience a lot of difficulties and hardships in the process, so those are some of the major lessons that have been learned.

## **Fund Raising for WCTC**

Wilmsen: Now, where did the initial funding come from for the West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: As I indicated, originally we were a project of the National Toxics Campaign based in Boston, Massachusetts, and they usually receive their funding through foundations. When we became a nonprofit independent organization, the funding still primarily comes through foundation sources and some bureaucratic contracts with some city or county government or federal agencies, but primarily grassroots fund raising, but primarily through some foundations.

Wilmsen: What's it been like raising funds for the coalition?

Clark: Well, you know, we've been in existence a long time now, maybe about ten years or so, so it's been a long run, but the longer you be around the more difficult it gets, because foundations usually do not want to continue to support you. So you have to continue to look at, identify, and try to diversify your funding source, or come up with creative ideas for projects to tap into other funding sources. So for any type of nonprofit group it's quite a difficult challenge. The more action-oriented that you are—community-organizing and action-oriented that you are—probably the more difficult it is, probably the less sources of funding that are around because you're involved in some type of controversial type of work.

Wilmsen: Who have been your major funders?

Clark: The major funder has been the San Francisco Foundation.

Wilmsen: What have been some of the creative ideas for projects you've come up with?

Clark: Well, you know, we basically look at diversifying our different foundations. Different sources may fund different work. For instance, you know, there's a lot of different issues in the area; some funding sources may be interested in supporting lead education and outreach.

Wilmsen: Lead paint?

Clark: Yes. Lead paint, or exposure to lead-based paint. So we have a lead education outreach project. Some may be involved in supporting community organizing, empowering organizing in lower income or underprivileged communities, and so we may tap into some funds from sources that support community organizing, per se. Some may be concerned about water pollution or air emissions or hazardous waste or incinerators that may be concerned with dioxins, or some may be concerned about the environment and breast cancer. Just whatever the particular annual approach that some particular funding source may be interested in, you have to try to develop a program that, you know, looks at what you're doing and see how it relates to their particular funding priorities and maybe gear a program that would address it that you could send directly to them to fund that aspect of your work.

Wilmsen: And you mentioned you've had contracts with federal agencies and other government agencies?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: Can you give some examples of those?

Clark: The EPA, for instance, had once supported a lead education and outreach project as well as the county. Contra Costa County Health Department had a lead education and outreach program and we were one of their awardees when we worked with them to do some lead education and outreach, but that's primarily been the extent of that.

Wilmsen: Now you mentioned that Chevron often contributes to community groups in Richmond and that makes it difficult for these groups to speak out on issues concerning Chevron? And I assume other industries do that as well.

Clark: Yes, sure.

Wilmsen: Have you encountered any similar kinds of pressures from the foundations that you get funding from?

Clark: Well, not recently. But even though the San Francisco Foundation has been one of our major supporters, the fact is that in the last couple of years they—well, I don't know to what degree that there was some concern, but for instance, Chevron contributes resources to the San Francisco Foundation.

Wilmsen: Oh.

Clark: Okay. So they did, I think a year or so ago, ask the question. I don't know if they did it before in the past or not, but I think a year or so ago they did approach Chevron to inquire about how Chevron felt about the foundation, you know, supporting West County Toxics Coalition. Apparently Chevron said that it didn't really bother them. So I would suspect that companies probably not only contribute to local organizations, but they probably contribute to the foundations also.

Wilmsen: Tell me about pushing for the use in Richmond of the state law allowing a 10 percent tax on hazardous waste handling facilities.

Clark: Yes, well, what that was is that the hazardous waste storage facility located in the North Richmond area was originally called Bay Area Environmental, and that company had numerous violations. The management was accepting hazardous waste that they were not permitted to accept and storing it.

The last violation was the company had accepted several barrels of jet fuel from Aerojet company based in Sacramento. The barrels exploded here in Richmond and shot up through the roof and landed in neighbors' back yards. The state health department then basically held some hearings, meetings, here in Richmond, and the end result was that the permit was taken from the previous owners and it was transferred to another company, a New Jersey-based company called Advanced Environmental Technology Services—AETS.

They were operating the facility, and during the process they had to get a conditional use permit from the City of Richmond and had to do some safety improvements there at the facility, like placing a fire wall between the oxidizers and the flammable storage areas. And one of the conditions of the project was that the 10 percent of the gross proceeds of the company would go into a fund that would be allocated to nonprofit groups in the two surrounding communities, the North Richmond Iron Triangle and Parchester areas, where groups could apply to this fund every year to support their projects. But they had to have at least some type of workshop or do some type of environmental education as part of their program to receive the funds, which usually averaged a total of about \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year, of which each nonprofit group probably received \$5,000 or \$6,000 for their project.

Wilmsen: And how did you go about pushing for that?

Clark: We basically worked with the city, the city attorney's office, because the City of Richmond had to issue the conditional use permit. It was an idea that came up through our conversation with the city attorney's office, that there were some provisions in the law and the health code—the public health and safety code—where you could apply such a city law to apply the 10 percent levy on the gross proceeds of the commercial hazardous waste facility.

Wilmsen: And did you encounter any opposition to your—

Clark: It wasn't any major opposition. I think that at the time, you know, the new owners of the company probably were pretty much eager to comply with the conditions. There were a lot of people in the community that really wanted the facility to close, and that the permit not to be transferred, and so the new owners were probably receptive to the conditions.

### **Professional Development and Networking in the Environmental Justice Movement**

Wilmsen: Then sometime in the 1990s you went for training at the Midwest Academy and also the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes.

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: What prompted you to seek that training?

Clark: Well, you know, those are two organizations that basically specialized in community organizing for grassroots groups. It was to basically enhance skills in community organizing. Basically, you know, you just want to learn as much as you can about the field that you're involved in, and these were a means of gaining more direct technical training and expertise.

Wilmsen: How long was the training?



Clark: They were probably a couple of days, actually. I'm not sure exactly, you know. You had to go out to some retreat somewhere. One was in Chicago. The Midwest Academy was in Chicago, so I had to go to Chicago for that. I'm not sure how many days, whether it was a week or three or four days, but it was some period of time. It didn't take more than a week. The other one, the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes, was a couple of days, also. And I don't recall where that was at. I think it was in the Los Angeles area somewhere.

Wilmsen: Was it useful?

Clark: Well, yes, sure. Yes, it was plenty useful. It was basically a step-by-step type of training, you know, where you went through the steps and processes of community organizing, conducting community meetings. It was basically like a training academy where you're basically hands on or role-playing of actual things that you had to do in the field: door-knocking or talking to people, holding community meetings, mock protests. So you basically have hands-on, nuts-and-bolts doing, role-playing the major activities.

Wilmsen: Did those workshops result in any new long-term relationships with other environmental justice groups?

Clark: Not directly through the workshops, but with the people associated with the training, you know, you met some people. You made some contacts with people from different areas that were going through the training, but primarily that was pretty much the extent of that.

Primarily the relationships with the other groups are basically a working relationship and supporting each other's work. For instance, here in the Bay Area, there's different groups in Oakland, San Francisco that do similar type of work. So when they have public hearings or protests, demonstrations, or activities, we go and support their work and send people there to support their work. And when we would have activities here in the Richmond area, they send people over to support our work, so building relationships to mutual support.

Wilmsen: What are some of those groups?

Clark: Well, there's PUEBLO in Oakland—People United for a Better Oakland. There's a Chester Street Block Club association that has been dealing with issues related to the rebuilding under Cypress freeway. PUEBLO has been addressing the medical waste incinerator on High Street in East Oakland. There's a Midway Advisory Council in Daly City that was representing residents that live in a Midway Village housing project operated by the San Mateo Housing Authority that's built on a contaminated site next to a PG&E substation. Those are probably some of the major groups.

Wilmsen: Did you attend that first People of Color Environmental Summit?

Clark: No, I didn't actually attend that. I think I was ill when that occurred, but the organization sent representatives there. We were delegates to that in '91. The organization was a delegate to that and we did send some people to that, but I personally didn't.



Wilmsen: What kind of impact did that summit have on the West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: Well, you know, it didn't really have any impact on us other than it sort of laid the basis for communities throughout the country that were working on environmental justice issues to come together and to lay out some principles of environmental justice. It served basically as a means of bringing people together to sort of officially and collectively launch the environmental justice movement.

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Wilmsen: Around that same time, the Southwest Organizing Project had a conference aimed at increasing minority participation in the environmental movement?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: And you attended that, didn't you?

Clark: Yes, I did.

Wilmsen: And what were your reactions to that?

Clark: I think that was one of the first efforts, again, to form some type of a network of environmental justice groups, in the South in particular, in terms of unifying communities that were working on similar type of issues. That was the effort to do that, and it was well needed.

Wilmsen: And what impact did it have on you, personally?

Clark: Well, the impact that it had on me was, first of all, to be in the South—it was held in Louisiana—to be there in the South and to meet with many of the groups and environmental justice leaders in the South.

I saw Connie Tucker, who is one of the leaders there in the Southern Organizing Project; Damu Smith, who's presently with Greenpeace, the national office in D.C.; Dr. Beverly Wright, who's a professor there and head of the environmental justice center at Xavier University. Those type of people, basically leaders in the environmental justice movement in the South, and I had the opportunity meet them there.

### **Good Neighbor Agreements, and Concerns about Cancer in Richmond**

Wilmsen: Okay, one more question about Chevron. You were trying to get a good neighbor agreement with them?

Clark: Right.

Wilmsen: And what did that all entail?

Clark: The good neighbor agreement is basically an agreement project by project, where it all depends on the project. You know, but it's basically where you sit down with your neighbor, where we would sit down with the company and come to some agreement on issues where it would end up being a win-win situation for both of us. That would be what a good neighbor agreement would be. You know, it would be a project-by-project type of agreement that would be arranged to sit down and discuss any issues and come to some kind of mutual agreements.

Wilmsen: And did you get them to agree to it?

Clark: Well, it's like I said, it's project by project. Say, for instance, when the company agreed to relocate the ammonia storage tanks, you know, on that particular issue and concern, that would be a good neighbor agreement because they sat down with their neighbor and the neighbor sits down and discusses an issue and concern about those ammonia storage tank being too close to the North Richmond community. We were successful in getting the company to relocate them, so that was a good neighbor agreement on that particular project.

But as you can see, a good neighbor agreement does not necessarily mean that you're a good neighbor all the way around. I mean, on the next particular issue or concern, they may not necessarily be so receptive. So the good neighbor agreement, that's the concept, but it basically relates to project-by-project. That's basically what the concept of a good neighbor agreement is, basically that a good neighbor would sit down with their neighbor and discuss the issues and try to come to some type of agreement rather than having to end up in court somewhere.

Wilmsen: I see. Now tell me about the cancer cluster in Richmond. Has the West County Toxics Coalition done any organizing around this?

Clark: Well, the issue about the health problems in the area still are under investigation. I do know that there's a 33 percent higher than state average lung cancer rate throughout the Richmond area stretching actually throughout the county, stretching through the industrial corridor, but there have not been any definitive studies done to actually say what's the cause of that. I mean, peoples' lifestyles have been blamed, but we say that we know that peoples' lifestyles can cause problems, but we also know that chemical exposure can cause a lot of health problems, or lung cancer, also, so let's look at all the causes. So you know, people die of cancer, complain about cancer, but it has not really been clearly defined as to any cause. We obviously suspect and people suspect that being exposed to chemicals in a petrochemical-dominated area is contributing to it, but actual scientific studies to actually confirm that have not occurred yet.

Wilmsen: Have you been trying to get any scientific studies done?

Clark: Well, yes, we have. One of the things that we're working on now, actually, is to try to get some testing done of residents for dioxin exposure. The last so-called cancer study that was done was done by the Contra Costa County Health Department that looked at the tumor registry and compared North Richmond and Parchester Village with the control area in West Oakland, which did not have the industrial base. The findings were that West Oakland had a higher cancer rate than North Richmond and Parchester Village, and so therefore Chevron and the industry were not contributing to cancer.

We think that that particular study was limited and had a lot of flaws in terms of the methodology. But you know, in terms of addressing the causes of the health problems, there's still a lot of research and work that needs to be done. Personally, while we support the community's right to know what chemicals they're exposed to and we support the community's right to be tested and health surveyed, we don't really think that we need to have to prove that people are sick and dying from chemical exposure. I mean, we think that the connection is plain and clear enough to us to have some action taken rather than just to study something to death or wait on studies before we understand the connection between chemical exposure and peoples' health problems.

Wilmsen: Then you've also done some organizing around the ICI Americas company?

Clark: Well, ICI Americas, yes—I guess it's Zeneca now. They're this company here in Richmond. They were formerly Stauffer Chemical Company changed to ICI Americas and now it's Zeneca, over in the south Richmond area. Basically they've pretty much scaled down their operations there, but the concern with that facility now, which is now under the name of Zeneca, is that—I guess there are actually a couple of concerns. The major concern is that Zeneca is a company that supports a major player in the breast cancer awareness month, as it's called, in October, yet Zeneca is a major polluter, a major contributor to cancer in the first place. Then Zeneca as a corporation also is involved in producing pharmaceuticals that supposedly treat cancer and do research on drugs for experimental treatment of cancer. They're also into the cancer treatment facilities. So basically Zeneca is profiting from the full circle of not only releasing chemicals into the environment that cause cancer, but then making a profit off of cancer pharmaceuticals, as well as the cancer treatment centers.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Clark: In addition to whatever particular issues and concerns that may relate to their plant in Richmond in terms of any chemical releases into the environment that residents are exposed to.

Wilmsen: How has dealing with them been different than dealing with Chevron?

Clark: Well, you know, we actually haven't been dealing with them that much because of the fact that pretty much they've been scaling back their operations here in Richmond. And we've been so overwhelmed with other stuff that we really haven't had a lot of time to specifically focus on Zeneca other than in October when breast cancer awareness month arrives and Zeneca's name always comes up. There was a demonstration there in front of Zeneca this year in October to highlight their role in the cancer connection in breast cancer awareness, but they haven't been a top priority.

### **The Erickson Hazardous Waste Treatment and Transfer Station, and the Good Neighbor Ordinance**

Wilmsen: Then you also did some organizing around the Erickson hazardous waste treatment and transfer station?

Clark: That is correct. The Erickson hazardous waste treatment and transfer station was a project that was being proposed in North Richmond to treat and store up to forty thousand tons of hazardous waste annually that would have been brought in from all parts of the county. We said that North Richmond did not need any more chemical hauling, storing, polluting type of facilities. The Erickson project then went forward. We were on the local assessment committee—basically the citizen committee that was formed to review this project as it went through the permitting process.

The West County Toxics Coalition position was that we did not want the project at all, period. But if, in fact, the project would be permitted, then we wanted to be sure that there were conditions in the permit or attached to it where the facility would be made as safe as possible for the community, so that's the two-pronged strategy that we had to use. In the final end, there were basically a lot of safety conditions that were attached to the facilities, like daily monitoring for any leaks or those type of things. It was also attached to it that, I think it was about \$300,000 a year from the proceeds from the facility would come back to the North Richmond community to be spent in the community if the facility was actually built.

Well, the facility was never built. Erickson ran into some financial problems. He finally, I think, sold the company out and the new owners explored the proposal and they felt it was no longer advantageous or profitable to pursue that project. They felt that it was no longer economically feasible to pursue that project, so that project was no longer in consideration.

Wilmsen: Now, you actually got some help from the Sierra Club on that one, didn't you?

Clark: Well, not necessarily. I don't know what the Sierra Club actually did as the club. Like I said, at that particular time, Mark Mason, who I believe may have even been the local head of the Sierra Club, was working with us—but I think that Mark was probably working more so on his own than as maybe a Sierra Club member, and more so than the Sierra Club.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Okay, and how would you describe your relationship with the county planning commission?

Clark: I wouldn't describe it as too great. The county planning commission never really has done anything for the community in terms of this particular point. I mean, you know, we've been before the county planning commission, you know, but they really have—I guess what they did do, there have been some county ordinances that have been adopted that were supported by environmental groups—the West County Toxics Coalition and Communities for a Better Environment—and finally were passed by the county. You know, they let it go through the planning commission, and before the board of supervisors, and they finally adopted it all, but they have not actually been as supportive as they should have, and they never really have done anything on their own.

Those ordinances were primarily developed by environmental justice groups. In terms of a project and projects that have come before them, I can't say that they have really sided with the community, you know. Probably the major project that did come before them was that Erickson project which they approved, and the community was opposed to it.



- Wilmsen: I'm sorry, you said that there were some ordinances that environmental justice groups—
- Clark: Well, you know, there was the—what did we call it? I guess it was called the good neighbor ordinance. It basically was the ordinance that was adopted that looked at the company's facility in terms of the scoring formula to determine whether a full environmental impact report was required or not, or assess a project with certain indicators in terms of how close it was to communities or sensitive receptors, or house building and so forth, or other factors, whether it was having chemicals being trucked in or piped in, or railcarred in, and other risk factors that have a certain score. And if the score was on a certain level, say above seventy, then it would automatically have to have a full-scale environmental impact report—an investigation, basically, of their project in terms of its impact on the environment and on the community. If it scored less than that, then it probably would not have to have that full-scale environmental impact report.
- It had some other features to it, but that was one of the ordinances. But basically when the board of supervisors changed over after the elections, you know, then the balance of forces on the board were more in support of the industry rather than the community environmental groups. Then the industry came up with an ordinance on their own that was basically to overturn or redo or change some of the provisions of the previous ordinance. That went through now, and so Communities for a Better Environment took the county to court. The court mandated that the county had to basically negotiate with Communities for a Better Environment on some issues on the ordinance, and that's being still worked out now.
- Wilmsen: I see. And how did that good neighbor ordinance come about in the first place?
- Clark: It was primarily with some input through the West County Toxics Coalition, but Communities for a Better Environment primarily had to develop it, because they have the attorneys on their staff, and so when you get down to developing ordinances and laws, you need the attorneys.
- Wilmsen: Right. And about when was that?
- Clark: I'm not sure of the exact year, but it was—'99 now.
- Wilmsen: Just approximately.
- Clark: '94 or '95.
- Wilmsen: So about five years ago?
- Clark: Yes.



## Community Health Concerns

[Interview 3: December 17, 1999] ##

### **The Safeway Fire**

Wilmsen: Today is December 17, 1999, and this is the third interview with Henry Clark.

Last time we covered a lot of the organizing that West County Toxics Coalition has done, and I wanted to continue in that same vein. Maybe we should start with the Safeway fire which occurred in the early nineties, I guess?

Clark: Yes.

Wilmsen: What issues did it raise and what did the West County Toxics Coalition do?

Clark: Well, in terms of the Safeway fire, basically it was a fire at the Safeway warehouse in the South Richmond area that sent a black, darkening smoke all over the Richmond area for about a week. The area was consumed with black toxic smoke from all the material and products burning at Safeway.

There was a big class action suit filed by many attorneys on behalf of residents after the fire, which they did win. As always, in those class action suits many people are not satisfied with the monetary compensation. But that was a suit filed.

In turn, what the West County Toxics Coalition did, we organized a health conference at the Martin Luther King Community Center here in Richmond, where we invited health department officials and Safeway people out to basically try to get some sense of the possible health impacts of the smoke. And that's always a problem because usually people go to the hospitals because of some exposure. In terms of tracking that, that's somewhat difficult, but we do know that there was several people that apparently died from complications due to the Safeway fire.

I know myself, from organizing. As a matter of fact, I was in the South Richmond area one evening when I was passing out fliers door to door organizing for this health forum that we were organizing. I came to one apartment and it was a lot of people—Latino and Mexican people—sitting around in the room, and I noticed the atmosphere seemed sort of solemn, you know, because no one was talking. I was telling them about this health forum that we were having on the Safeway fire and one of the ladies said, "Well, you know, that's quite a coincidence that you're talking about this health forum on the Safeway fire. That's what we're here for now. We just got back from burying our grandmother. She died from complications due to the Safeway fire."

And there were some other people, as I was told, that died. So these chemical disasters, they do affect people's lives and people do die from them. You usually don't hear about the deaths that do occur. They just end up being faceless people whose families may be

aware of it, but most of the time you don't hear about that. Nor do you really even get a good sense of the health impacts, because usually there's no type of comprehensive health studies that are done or conducted after these disasters.

### **The United Heckathorn Superfund Site**

Wilmsen: Yes. Tell me about organizing around the United Heckathorn site.

Clark: The United Heckathorn site was a contaminated site on the waterfront there at the port area of Richmond, and going back to the early forties there had been, I think, a couple of chemical companies there at one point including United Heckathorn, which left contamination of PCBs, and a wide range of other chemical pollutants. The site was designated a superfund site for cleanup. The EPA and other regulatory agencies held public meetings here in Richmond where we discussed the cleanup, the remediation, and all of that. There was good public community participation in the process. So the site was being cleaned or remediated. The waste, as I recall, was to be shipped to some waste site, I believe it was in Idaho, owned by Waste Management. When the waste was being shipped there, we heard from the EPA that—well, we didn't actually hear it from EPA at first. The waste went to Idaho. In the final end, it was not the appropriate type of legal site to accept that type of waste, and so it was diverted to another hazardous waste facility owned by Waste Management in Mobile, Arizona, in a low-income community there of some blacks and Mexican people. And so they [the community] had contacted Greenpeace, at the time, which was working with that community in Arizona—Bradley Angel, in particular.

We were contacted, and we investigated and we found out from the EPA that the waste site, original waste site in Idaho, was not the appropriate one legally, and so the waste was diverted to Mobile which we were not aware of. The community there was complaining, and we joined with that community to protest the waste being shipped there to Mobile, Arizona. We sent a couple of our members—board chair and a couple of other members—there to Mobile, Arizona, to stand with the community.

In the final end the EPA found another waste site in Utah to ship the waste to that pretty much solved the problem. Now, one of the questions that was asked to West County Toxics Coalition by a news reporter was, "Well, why did West County Toxics Coalition support the waste not going to Mobile, Arizona, and stood with that community, yet you did not—or did you have any concerns about it going to this site in Utah, where it finally ended up going?"

So I said, "No, that's a good question. The reason being is that we're concerned about the waste going anywhere that it's affecting peoples' lives, whatever their class or race, but what we found out was that the waste site in Utah was a waste site that was much further away from any residents, and the fact that the community had at some point passed a referendum that they didn't have any problems with that facility being located where it was." They basically, for whatever reason, had discussed and assessed the situation and they had voted as a community that that facility could be there. So based on that, in addition to the fact that it was apparently away from residential areas, we

didn't see any problem with the waste finally going to that particular facility and resolving that situation. So that's primarily what happened with the United Heckathorn site.

Wilmsen: So on that site in Utah, were there any concerns about the waste contaminating surface water or ground water or affecting wildlife or anything of that nature?

Clark: Well, no, those questions never come up, you know, because the fact is, is that I've never seen the site directly, but I did do some investigation, and what information I received was that the site was away from residential areas, and the people who lived there had voted to accept it. So whether it affected any surface and ground water or anything—the fact is, it was a hazardous waste facility that had to meet certain type of scrutiny before it's sited anywhere. Of course, I know that that still is not adequate in many cases, but the major primary consideration was that the community had voted to have the facility there.

Wilmsen: What was the community?

Clark: I don't recall the exact place, but I think it was some community somewhere in Utah.

Wilmsen: Actually I forgot to ask you one thing about the Safeway fire. What was the outcome of the health forum?

Clark: It was basically to try and provide some information about what was the extent of the health problems there, and people gave their input in terms of any particular illnesses that they were experiencing and so forth because there were county health department officials there. In terms of whether there was any type of long-term health effects or anything of that nature, no type of health study was done to assess that, so that's a big gap in terms of assessing health impacts. When people are exposed to these type of fires and chemical disasters, if there's not any long-term health studies, even short term, then you really do not know the long-term health effects.

Wilmsen: Have you tried to get a study like that done?

Clark: Well, we've done a health study. The only long-term health study, as it was called, was done after the General Chemical Company sulfuric acid disaster where there was a short-term as well as long-term look at the health problems people experienced. That was probably about a year after the incident occurred, you know, but that was pretty much the extent of any type of long-term health study that had ever been conducted.

Wilmsen: Now, did those two accidents or other accidents feed into the county improving its emergency preparedness plans?

Clark: Well, you know, not actually. It was only the General Chemical Company sulfuric acid disaster of July 26, 1993, that motivated industry and county officials to install the sirens as part of the warning system.

Wilmsen: Right. We talked about that last time.

Clark: Yes.

## **The West County Landfill**

Wilmsen: Then how about the West County Toxics Coalition's involvement in the siting of the new county landfill?

Clark: The landfill is located in North Richmond, what is this area of west county. The landfill has always been located in North Richmond somewhere, you know, even from when I was growing up. There was landfill in the west county. I think there's another landfill in east county, but for the west county area, this landfill has always been in North Richmond. The one that was being used when I was growing up as a kid, that one closed and the new one opened further in the North Richmond area, but it's expected to close maybe in the next couple of years.

They've been given different dates that have been extended. I think they're in the process now of developing a closure plan for that. The recycling center has been opened in North Richmond, which, when the landfill finally closes, the recycling center will recycle all the garbage that can be recycled and truck the remaining garbage either to a landfill in Vallejo County or Solano County that's owned by the Richmond Sanitary Service that operates the dump, or it'll be trucked to Keller Canyon in Pittsburg more than likely—the landfill that's in Solano County that the Richmond Sanitary Service basically owns and operates.

Wilmsen: Are there concerns about the landfills being located next to residential areas?

Clark: The landfill is somewhat a little ways away from the residential area. Of course there's always the concern about the landfill, you know, and the odors, depending upon which way the wind is blowing and just leaving contamination there that may possibly leach into the bay waters and further contaminate the bay waters that people fish in. All of those are questions in addition to the methane gas buildup under the landfill and how that's dealt with. Usually when they're closed, those are either burned or incinerated in some type of way, which, you know, raises other questions of dioxin emissions and other contaminants, even the possibility of the landfill exploding if it's not managed properly—the gas is not addressed properly.

Wilmsen: What are they using the old landfill for now?

Clark: Well, they're not using it for anything now. It's just closed, I think. Chevron, I believe, maybe built some type of access gate to the refinery over parts of what was the landfill, but it's not used for any other purpose.

### **Incorporating Environmental Justice Concerns into Company Accident Prevention Plans and County Redevelopment Plans**

Wilmsen: Now, what impact has the state law requiring companies to develop chemical accident prevention plans had on West County Toxics Coalition's activities, if any?



Clark: We were involved in the risk management prevention plan program from the very beginning. What we had advocated initially with that particular program was that the worst-case scenarios should have been looked at. Originally the program only looked at the what was called the most likely or most credible case, and we said, "Well, these accidents that we have seen occurring around the country and around the county in many cases were worse cases that you didn't expect to occur, and so you need to start looking at the worst case."

Then when the federal program for the risk management prevention program came out, it required that companies have to look at the worst-case scenario like we had been advocating, so I was part of the committee that the county set up to help to develop and implement the program here in California or in Contra Costa County. My input was from a community perspective in terms of ensuring that the promotional material, the videos, that were developed to explain the program, that it was representative of the people in the communities that lived around these refineries, that it was inclusive, that it asked the questions that residents had been asking about facilities. And so I was able to be part of the process to review the literature (the fact sheets of information), select the company that produced the promotional video, review the video, participate in workshops or discussion groups around what the risk management prevention program was about, and give some perspective from a community-activist, or resident standpoint.

The program would then actually reflect to the public the worst-case scenario rather than—which was a fear or concern that industry officials may try to minimize the impact or basically not really project a worst-case scenario. And so with my involvement in that particular program, I think that it worked out well in terms of being able to actually project that worst-case scenario to the public and what that would mean, and particularly, also what industry was doing to prevent that worst-case scenario from occurring.

Wilmsen: What kind of questions were the community residents asking?

Clark: Questions about how far would the plumes go, what the companies were doing primarily to prevent it, you know, because everyone pretty much already had some type of worst-case scenario in their mind anyway. If there was a major disaster that people could possibly be wiped out or killed, those fears were already there. Certainly a worst-case scenario probably validated people's concerns, so they were mainly concerned about what companies are doing to prevent it, you know, in terms of any type of warning system to alert residents when they do occur, and what they're doing to prevent it in terms of any secondary containment areas when they have a spill, or operating safer, or prevent accidents—those type of questions and concerns.

Wilmsen: Were you satisfied with industry's implementation of the plans?

Clark: Well, you know, the plans are one thing. As far as that goes, accidents still occur. I'm sure that the plans to some degree help to prevent accidents, but when you're dealing with complex processes like refineries and chemical companies, accidents more than likely are going to occur. And unfortunately, the reality of it is that when they do occur, because it's such a dangerous operation, those accidents can pose a threat to public health and safety. So it probably helped, certainly, having plans in place to address



possible problems or disasters and prevent them. It's certainly fine, but to say that a refinery or chemical company is going to be accident-free, I don't think that we've gotten to that point, yet.

Wilmsen: Okay. But that's your goal, to be accident-free?

Clark: Well, sure. I mean, that's the goal in life, to be accident-free. But getting there is entirely another question.

Wilmsen: What impact is the change in industry in Richmond from traditional manufacturing to kind of high tech having on low-income neighborhoods?

Clark: We haven't actually experienced that to any great degree. The only thing is that in terms of the jobs, people with less education probably could have easily been trained for manufacturing jobs. But with the high tech stuff, this requires a different type of person—educated person. And as far as the job market is concerned, it would be quite restrictive in terms of who would be employed at those facilities. So that's one particular concern.

The others are in terms of what they do. And for this particular area, it's still under investigation. The research needs to be done because Richmond wants to be some type of biotech center. There are some high tech operations around, but I know that in terms of what they're doing, whether there's any chemical uses or discharges into the bay waters or the sewer system or even into the air, other than knowing that there are concerns, you know, we haven't actually been able to focus on that particular area.

Wilmsen: Tell me about reviewing the redevelopment plans for land uses in Richmond, the county's redevelopment plans.

Clark: I'm one of the environmental representatives on the Contra Costa County Hazardous Materials Commission and make recommendations to the board of supervisors on issues primarily relating to the environment, hazardous materials, like that. And one of the efforts that I've been doing as a member of the county's hazardous materials commission—I'm presently the chair of the operations committee that is charged with developing this environmental justice policy—has basically been trying to get or develop the environmental justice policies for the county based on the environmental justice principles that have become standard, that were adopted at the first People of Color Environmental Justice Summit that was in '91. Communities of color or low-income communities have borne the brunt of the siting of chemical companies, refineries, landfills, and transportation routes which have given them a disproportionate impact. That general plan would be changed basically to recognize this disproportionate impact and do whatever is necessary through a change in the general plan using zoning and other planning tools that are available for communities to stop this continued proliferation of disproportionate impact.

If the county needed other hazardous waste storage or treatment facilities or other chemical facilities which posed a risk to the community, then it would not continue to be sited in the same communities that have already been disproportionately impacted, or that there would be some type of thinking if there was [a new facility], to maybe close

down something else that was there, so that in the final end, those communities would not continue to see an increase in risk from these type of facilities.

But ideally they would begin to look at other areas to locate these type of facilities—maybe industrial parks, away from everyone. To me, it would stop this same disproportionate impact and dumping on communities of color or low-income communities and force the county to do better planning where they would have to look at these facilities and what risk they bore and do better planning that would protect everyone.

And then what we would do is to basically concentrate on the facilities that already exist in communities that have disproportionate impact, to work with those companies to operate safer, to reduce risk from chemical hazards, and so the situation would get safer. It would get safer in the communities that are already disproportionately impacted, because they would pretty much have the law of the land working for them where they would no longer be dumped on. You would work to clean up those facilities that already exist and hold them accountable to operating safer. And for the future, there would be a more conscious awareness of where facilities or transportation routes having dangerous chemicals would be located at, and there would be some sense of equity in the future planning.

Wilmsen: How have people on the county commission responded to—

Clark: Well, you know, some people respond well. Everyone says that they're for environmental justice—obviously, even industry officials. I mean, because no one is just going to come out and say they're not for environmental justice. But in the final end, in terms of how that's played out, they have concerns—particularly industry—how this would affect their operations if they wanted to expand, or just a lot of undue fears and concerns that it means closing them down or having some undue hardship on them. Getting beyond those type of questions means first of all understanding the basis of and philosophy behind it, that environmental justice means justice for everyone. It's not a situation where you're out to get someone—you're out to get industry or get anyone—but it's about bringing about justice.

Now justice may mean in some particular cases that you may have to take some particular action or something that you may not necessarily like or something, but you know, that's an entirely different question. When you're looking at it from an environmental justice perspective—or justice, period—the bottom line is that you work out a situation where it will be just for everyone involved, and that's really what you have to keep the major focus on, especially when you're trying to deal with situations that have been historically unjust.

Wilmsen: And what are your biggest obstacles in getting those environmental justice principles incorporated into the county plan?

Clark: There are a lot of issues and concerns. Here again, there's educational work to be done in terms of hearing what concerns industry people have, or developers, or anyone else has, and addressing those issues. So public education and forums to get people to express their views and their worst fears and concerns so they can be addressed.

The county community development department, the departments that would have to amend the general plan and go through a public process, are concerned about not having the staff or the time and the resources, the money, being allocated to their departments to carry out this work, you know, and that they may possibly get bogged down in a legal conflict because the general plan has to be consistent through and through in areas that are maybe zoned for industry in a community.

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Clark: —or in areas that have been zoned for industry. And you say that a person can't put an industrial operation or facility there because of environmental justice concerns. Well then, they have to use part of their land for a buffer zone. Well, then that's like a violation of their constitutional rights under the Fifth Amendment or illegal taking of their property. I think that those issues will be worked out, but those are some of the concerns at the moment.

Wilmsen: What do you see as your biggest opportunities?

Clark: The biggest opportunity is to continue to educate the public and the people who are affected, the decision-makers, and industry, and all. That's the approach that we are taking. In the final end, I think that the biggest advantage that we have working for us, unfortunately, probably is that the situation exists. We do have the facts; we have the information; we have the factual basis to support the fact that environmental injustice or disproportionate impact on certain communities—be that based on race or class—is a reality, and so the facts of the matter speak for itself. That's clear, so it should become plain and clear to everyone that we need to do something about that situation.

So as long as we don't end up being in a situation where someone is able to basically, in spite of the facts, just stall out the process forever so you don't ever get anything done, or people become discouraged and just drop it and the status quo continues to exist, as long as we stay on it until that materializes, we know, with that factual basis, we'll get the job done.



### III THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF WCTC'S WORK

#### President Clinton's Executive Order on Environmental Justice

Wilmsen: What impact, if any, did President Clinton's executive order on environmental justice have on West County Toxics Coalition activities?

Clark: Well, the executive order that President Clinton signed was good in terms of focusing attention on environmental justice and the problems that communities have with disproportionate impact and compelling federal agencies to examine their operations to be sure that they're not contributing to any environmental injustices and all. Of course, it basically was raising a consciousness about environmental justice and the problems that communities have experienced.

In terms of whether it actually has done anything, it is really questionable. As a whole assessment, personally, it hasn't really done a whole lot in terms of stopping this situation because many of these land use decisions for siting are local.

For instance, if a facility was proposed for North Richmond and we said that it was an extension of disproportionate impact that already exists, then what we would have to do is basically file a complaint to the EPA under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. If the EPA accepted and acted upon it, then that would mean that any agency or city that was trying to push that project on the community would be threatened with having their federal funds taken away. That's a leverage that communities have.

But you know, that has really not occurred. Many cases that communities around the country have filed are pending; the EPA is just in the process now of finalizing their guidelines in terms of how they would process Title VI cases. So that was a step forward in terms of raising the consciousness of the nation around environmental justice, but in terms of how it has played out, it really has not afforded the protections that we would have liked for it to have afforded at this particular time. And now that the president is leaving office, it's questionable whether the next president, especially if it's a Republican, will even have any environmental justice executive order at all.



## Globalization and Environmental Justice

Wilmsen: How do issues of globalization affect the environmental justice movement?

Clark: Well, the issues of globalization affect the environmental justice movement basically because of the fact that the companies are going to many third world countries, as they're called, and basically getting away with murder there, for instance, from the cheap labor supply there. I mean, just look at the maquiladoras along the Mexican-US border there, you know, where women are exploited and sexually harassed, where they live in squalor, and are exposed to chemicals and hazardous waste.

Or even in many other countries. I just came back from a trip to Nigeria from September 5 through the 20th, looking at the role of the multinational oil companies there, where it's basically just an outright murder situation that's occurring there. Here the oil companies like Chevron, or Mobil, or Shell that are operating in Ogoniland, over the years have cut deals with dictators, as they did in Nigeria. In maybe about the last, what, four or five months they just had so-called democratic elections in Nigeria, but even before then, they had cut deals with the dictatorships.

You know, the people in the villages where the oil is being found and it's pumped have oil pipes running above ground directly in front of their houses, the villagers' houses, that children play on. And those pipes get hot.

They have big flares blooming in the village, big balls of fire two or three stories high, going twenty-four hours a day right there in the villages where people are living in the little mud huts with palm tree branches with no running water. Their water that they use to fish and bathe and do whatever else with, the oil companies are dumping garbage in it or have oil spills and just don't clean it up.

People are asking for the minimum of jobs and health care investment in their community. They don't get none of that. When they complain and demonstrate, the military comes in and burns the villages down and shoots and kills people. So this is what globalization has meant to third world people. You know, it hasn't raised their standard of living, and hasn't provided them with jobs that would have decent wages. Even the ones that do get a job, it's environmental destruction and basically just extreme exploitation of those people, even worse than here in the United States where there's some democracy in environmental protection agencies and laws.

So you know, I've seen the effects of globalization first-hand, because the bottom line is that globalization is not based—the companies do not operate on any basis of respect for human beings or production for human beings; it's production for profit. It's exploitation. We see the situation here in the United States, so why would we think that globalization would result in anything else in Africa or India. You know, we don't even have full employment here in the United States, in the heart of capitalism. And unions are under attack, so in third world countries, to talk about unions and organizing would be nonsense.

Wilmsen: Have you seen any tangible impacts of globalization here in Richmond?

Clark: The tangible impacts of globalization—not in that particular sense in terms of complaints by some company that any particular law or protections that our community has as far as environmental laws are a restriction on their trade, or some grievance that they've made, through the World Trade Organization, or whatever. No, we have not seen in that particular sense any effects of globalization.

But you know, I've certainly seen it in terms of inferior products. I mean, that's where I've seen it so far, in terms of inferior products that are finding their way into communities. Particularly many people who basically try to survive from day to day shop at a lot of these discount stores and convenience stores like Wal-Mart or the Gap and many others where in many cases a lot of the products are made in third world countries, that have exploited cheap child labor or women in those countries to produce those products that we end up getting here.

Now that's one part of it. And people buying those products basically buy into that exploitation and globalization. But in addition, the products in many cases are basically inferior because they're produced cheap; they are products which basically are built to wear out. For instance, a pair of shoes: they're cheap shoes, and many poor people look for the bargains; so, you know, you go and buy a pair of shoes that's designed to basically fall apart or wear out in five or six months and then you've got to go and buy another pair. You thought that you were getting a discount in the first place, but unfortunately it's designed where it doesn't last due to the quality of it.

They're made in such a way now—while you used to be able to, in many cases, go and put a heel and a sole on a shoe, once the newer designs wear out, they're built where you can't do that: you just have to throw them away and go get another pair. You buy a jacket and think that you're getting a discount, but now in many cases the zippers are made out of some plastic material that the quality of it is not as strong as the metal zipper that you used to use, and so the zipper ends up breaking. Now, you thought you were getting a discount or a reasonable price for the jacket, but now the zipper is broken on it, and so you're either going to have to go get another jacket or pay some exorbitant price to replace that zipper because you just can't go to the store to get another one because of the way that the whole thing is designed.

I'm probably seeing all of those type of issues of product quality more. So we feel the impact of globalization in that particular sense more so than in the sense of any type of protections that we may have being challenged by some company that wants to put their facility in our community. You know, we'd say, "Well, we have some land use laws saying that you can't do that," and then they're complaining about some type of restriction on trade or something.

### **NAFTA and WTO: Allowing Companies to Get Away with Murder**

Wilmsen: What's your take on NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]?

Clark: Well, you know, it's the same. We've been involved in those campaigns. Like I said, we've worked with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice

based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and we've seen and worked with people along the Mexican border there. We worked with the *maquiladoras*, and we know that NAFTA has not, here again, resulted in any type of decent jobs with benefits for people abroad or in third world countries, nor has it resulted in all the advantages to the people that the world was led to believe that it would. It resulted in more profits for the companies and corporations that take advantage of the lack of environmental laws and cheap labor supplies. Yes, more profits for them, but it certainly has not resulted in any decent jobs or uplifting of the overall standard of living of people around the world where these companies are operating.

Wilmsen: Have you worked in any kind of capacity with congresspeople or anything like that on the environmental side agreements or any of those things regarding NAFTA?

Clark: Well, not in regards to NAFTA. We've worked with a lot of other different groups that deal with those. We certainly support those efforts. We've probably sent letters. We work with any particular local or state or federal legislation that relates to the environment, and I'm sure we've tried to, whenever possible—especially on the state level—attend hearings on legislation. We've attended many congressional hearings that were relating to the environment that were held here in Richmond by our congressman, George Miller. This was usually after some particular chemical disaster, and committees that he was on that may be on relating to the environment had hearings here or that type of approach. As I indicated to you earlier, when I first became associated with the West County Toxics Coalition, we took a delegation to Washington, D.C., to testify before the Senate on the reauthorization of the Clean Air Act. So we've participated in those type of ways. Basically we have been involved in protests and demonstrations against NAFTA and the World Trade Organization and all those activities to expose what those groups are all about and what this means for the world people. That has been our involvement and participation.

Wilmsen: Do you feel like that's effective involvement?

Clark: I think it's effective involvement, yes. It is because, first of all, you know, people should speak out and take whatever action against any injustices that they perceive that are happening. They should resist it in their mind and in their heart first and foremost. And they should as a step do whatever that they can do under the circumstances to add their voice or their bodies to any particular activities and struggles to oppose any type of unjust practices. So to the degree that we can participate—the resources and all those questions depend on the level of our involvement—certainly we would always, if it was just a phone call or writing a letter to our congressperson or whomever, we would always protest any injustices to anybody, period.

Wilmsen: What do you think should change so that you could be more effective?

Clark: A lot of these decisions happen on a federal level or state level, and so you know, in terms of participating and being more effective in those activities and discussions where laws are being made, obviously it comes down to a resource question. We can't fly people into Washington, D.C., to hearings and that type of stuff, so we have to write letters and make phone calls. We may be able to get to Sacramento sometimes to hearings on laws that are affecting us, but it's always a resource question to the extent that you can participate in any type of decision or actions on any given level.



Wilmsen: Now, what did you think of the recent World Trade Organization [WTO] protest in Seattle? Did you go to those?

Clark: No, I didn't go to the ones in Seattle, but I was at the one that was held in San Francisco, so we were all in harmony and unity in the process. We have a membership in the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, that organization that we are part of sent some people there as well as other organizations that I'm a part of outside of the West County Toxics Coalition. I didn't go personally, but I participated in some actions in San Francisco in this area because of the fact that Shell and Chevron have their corporate headquarters in San Francisco. There's the Gap operations also. And those are the type of companies that are part of what the people were protesting in Seattle: those type of companies' activities in third world countries where this whole process of WTO allows them to exploit people—allows the Gap to exploit people for cheap labor, allows Chevron to go into Nigeria and basically kill innocent protestors.

### **Networking with Other Groups: Regional and International Involvements**

Wilmsen: What does it mean to be a member of the Southwest Network?

Clark: What it means to be a member of the Southwest Network is that you have united with communities throughout the Southwestern part of the United States, which takes in a lot of the original people: native people in Ward Valley, or the Havasupai tribe deep down in the Grand Canyon, [and] many other native people in this country that are still fighting for their lives from uranium mining and other chemical hazards that are being dumped upon them. It means uniting with people in Mexico who are being exploited in those factories—those *maquiladoras* along the border. It means uniting with those various diverse communities that have similar issues and concerns. That's what it means.

Wilmsen: What's the advantage to the West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: The advantage is that we're part of a regional structure where we can share our experiences with other people, we can learn from each other. They can learn from the things that have worked for us, and we can learn from what has worked for them. We can support each other. The more support we have for each other's struggle, the better off we all are.

Wilmsen: Does that help you with fund raising at all?

Clark: It doesn't necessarily help us with fund raising. It helps in the sense that when the Southwest Network has events—legal workshops, or technical assistance type of workshops, or conferences that provide information that we all need—then they sponsor those events; they fly people in to Albuquerque or Texas or wherever. So in that particular sense it helps us because otherwise we would have to pay for it, but they cover the expense.

Wilmsen: Okay. Oh, I was going to ask you how it came about that you went to Nigeria. You mentioned going there.

Clark: I went to Nigeria as part of a delegation that had been working on issues relating to the multinational oil companies in Nigeria. Some groups had already been working from D.C. Also, Global Exchange out of San Francisco and some other groups, even West County Toxics Coalition, have had a long-standing working relationship with the groups and people in Nigeria as well as Nigerian people here in the Bay Area and in other parts of the United States that are still working to address those environmental issues and crises that they experienced at home. We have been working with them over the years, and so this opportunity, this trip, came up to actually go there and see with our own eyes and visit and find out what's going on. That's how it came about.

Wilmsen: How did you fund that trip?

Clark: Most of it was funded—part of it—most of it was funded through the organization that sponsored it, but each person had to put up a certain amount of the fees. Basically we had to save our resources to be part of the program, which was somewhat of a burden, but it was worth it.

Wilmsen: I'm sorry, who did you say sponsored the trip?

Clark: Global Exchange and, I think, Central Action out of Washington, D.C.

### **Returning to Graduate School to Earn a PhD in Religious Counseling**

Wilmsen: Okay. And then at some point in there, you went back to graduate school to pursue a PhD in religious counseling?

Clark: That's absolutely correct. Yes.

Wilmsen: What prompted you to do that?

Clark: Well, the thing is, is that I've always been a seeker of education and knowledge and I do have a strong spiritual foundation. So in terms of my studies, here again, interdisciplinary perspective, was to look at what different religions—you know, what was their perspective, and basically also to get some background in counseling because that's what I have done a whole lot of over the years. I guess primarily I am a spiritual person. Like I said, I've been through a lot of different religious denominations in name and so forth, but basically, you know, at this particular point, I'm not associated with any particular denomination or religion in that particular sense other than knowing what they all stand for and trying to work with people, whatever they believe, on projects or work that's for the benefit of people and improving life—creating a new society here, right here, on this side of the graveyard. I think that we can work together in that part of it, and I don't let some discrepancies about what lies beyond the graveyard keep me divided from working with people that are all for trying to make something better on this side. So that's where the training and the education come in in the religious studies



and counseling. I do have a doctorate degree and I do have those credentials, and even the title as a minister, as far as that goes, but you know, I don't use titles, I just do the work that needs to be done.

Wilmsen: Are you active as a minister now?

Clark: I'm active in the sense of I believe that my ministry is the social ministry, so in that particular sense, yes.

Wilmsen: But you're not part of a formal church organization?

Clark: No.

Wilmsen: Are you doing any other kind of counseling, like what you did before with Neighborhood House or working for any other—or are you strictly working with West County Toxics Coalition?

Clark: Well, I'm strictly working with West County. That's where I work at, but, like I said, in terms of my work in terms of my counseling, I believe it's all mixed up. It's all together, you know, in terms of trying to create a better society and better world. That's really the therapy that we all need, and once people get challenged in that direction, their healing energies, and their development as a human being would come forward and take care of itself. That's what I'm working for.

As a member of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council which I helped to develop—the West County Toxics Coalition was involved there. We're the first elected officials in that community. With the development that's going on there, we're basically taking the community that nobody wanted, a jungle or a desert, and we're basically working to turn it into a garden—you know, a society, a community where people respect each other, where people live as human beings should in the environment, that basically in the final end could serve as a model community. So that's the social vision that's happening there.

Once you get people to understand, or recognize, or respect each other as human beings and learn to live in this environment together, and cooperate, and build in it, and share in the resources, developing the resources and sharing those resources for the benefit of the people, period, whatever they look like, then you've done the best counseling that you can do. Because once people get that message and get in harmony with that, all those other ills and problems that they have from racism and others not being able to get along with each other because of class or race or whatever other type of foolishness and nonsense that's making people sick—this society and the way that it's structured is really what's making people sick—once you get them on the right track in building a real human society, and bringing out the best in them, their creative forces to make that happen, then you are counseling and you are healing them in the best way that you ever could.

**Encouraging Responsible Economic Development in North Richmond**

Wilmsen: And as a member of this board, this municipal board, how are you going about making those changes in the community?

Clark: Well, the changes are occurring already because of the fact that, particularly in that community, for the first time in the whole history of that community, people have an elected council of their own people there in the community that are elected by them to govern them. So that had never happened at all. And the fact is, people have the resources—

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Clark: —such as the North Richmond Center for Health that's been built and is operating now, the commercial center that's been built there, the senior apartments that are built there in North Richmond, the Richmond Parkway Estate, and many other projects that are on the drawing board for development.

We just had our last meeting Tuesday. I talked to an applicant that's going to build a 76 service station, a convenience store, a Taco Bell, and a Pizza Hut in North Richmond off the Richmond Parkway. So these type of developments are happening in the community where the community is being built up and developed. Resources are there like never before. This is all part of the vision of the redevelopment plan for North Richmond that projects a plan of development for that community for over a forty-year period of time. There's a vision for the community, and it's been created and designed by the community through the groundswell of the community setting in a process where they were able to elect their own officials for governing them in that community and develop that community in a forward, positive direction—to make a new North Richmond.

Wilmsen: Now, those businesses you just named, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut and so on, are big, franchise, national corporations. Do you have plans to try and encourage local independent businesses?

Clark: Well, local independent businesses certainly are ideal, you know, but the thing is, we take what we can there and hope to encourage further development. Even there, those companies, when they are located in North Richmond, they have to agree to first-source hire; they have to agree to hire local community people.

Also, the development helps to improve and uplift property there and increases the incremental tax revenue that comes directly to North Richmond to be spent on programs and services in North Richmond. Certainly in terms of local development, or people from the community having some franchise, or being able to participate in some joint operations, or develop some operation facility, ideally, yes, a mix of that would be great. But you know, those things are in the making. The point is, is that the community is developing. You do the best that you can under the circumstances. Personally, I'm not naïve enough to think that under the present structure—whereas I may be able to do some good things to build up North Richmond, that's only one community. Whatever I do to turn that around, that's part of a federal structure. It's part of a system. Certainly

North Richmond is changing and a lot of great things are happening there, but we don't just live in an isolated world in North Richmond, so the problems and issues that we're talking about are much broader.

There are national and international problems. That's why we are part of regional and national and international organizations and work with communities internationally. We've had people come here to share experience with us and learn from us from as far away as Tokyo, Japan, or the Ukraine in the former Soviet Union, or Bhopal, India, or Nigeria. You know, wherever. We recognize that we do whatever we can locally to improve the situation in terms of these problems and issues, but—which is good because it shows people, on whatever level and wherever you're at, that things can change, that it's not a hopeless situation if they get organized in their community and they unite with people who are organizing in other places to improve their quality of life, because this is all one struggle and one fight. As human beings we should be concerned about not only our own plight in North Richmond, but also the plight of people in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, or Europe, or wherever people need to improve their quality of life.

Wilmsen: Now, when those businesses are required to hire local people for their workforce, do they get something in exchange for that? Like do they just accept that as a condition of locating here, or do they ask for, say, tax breaks or anything like that?

Clark: No, they don't. Those are part of the conditions of operating in the community. They're making profits off of the community, so they should be giving something back to the community, not only in terms of tax revenue, but in terms of jobs and opportunities for people in the community.

Wilmsen: Have you had any experience with how that works once they're actually here, or is this still too new to really know?

Clark: Well, you know, the problem is it doesn't work too well unless you're monitoring the results. There's other agencies. See, my role is—I can't be everywhere—as a council member I work to get policy set. Then there's other organizations that have the responsibility to follow through.

For instance, it's the policy that we have a first-source hire for North Richmond. Now, there's other employment agencies in the community that deal with employment in the community that would interact with those particular companies to ensure that they knew what type of employees they needed, to identify people in the community, to train people, and to ensure that the employment occurs. Now, if there were problems, then they would report back to the MAC [Municipal Advisory Committee], and we would investigate it, but there's the monitoring, the oversight, to make sure that it occurs.

Usually the big problem comes in on the construction side. Say, if a building is being built and the contractor has agreed to hire local people, well, they usually already have their people, and so unless it's constantly monitored, or you hold them accountable, what they'll do is they'll bring in their own people. Then it'll be one excuse or the other: that the people that were sent out to them didn't work out, or they had an attitude problem, or whatever. And some of that is probably true, but the project is going on all at the same time, and so it ends up, when the project is complete, then the community



did not, in the final end, really get what it was supposed to because there was always some type of excuse, and the project never stops. The county government does have the authority to stop a project until they comply, but—labor and that part of it—we're still working that out, because obviously the county government that's part of the projects is resistant because they're afraid of possible lawsuits and so forth.

So in the community, basically that monitoring process needs to be tightened up to ensure that these companies are hiring local people, that they're following the policy. If that's not occurring, then you know, the MAC or the community just needs to maybe go out and just demonstrate or have a sit-down at the project so the work doesn't go on, or to let them get the message that the community is serious.

Wilmsen: Yes. Have there been any of those kinds of protests?

Clark: Well, not at the moment, no.

### **Perspectives on Relations Between Environmental Justice Groups and "Mainstream" Environmental Groups**

Wilmsen: Okay. I'd like to talk a little bit about the environmental movement as a whole. I was wondering what you see as the points of convergence and divergence between the so-called mainstream environmental movement and the environmental justice movement.

Clark: With the official formation of the environmental justice movement in the first People of Color Environmental Justice Summit that was held, the big ten, the major environmental groups, were put on notice that they really were not inclusive, in that in many cases they had been working in opposition to environmental justice. That particular situation has pretty much not changed. Some have maybe tried to address it to some degree by hiring some person of color on their staff or something, but by and large, that situation has not changed.

There's probably a lot of reasons why. They don't usually do the type of grassroots community organizing that's necessary to deal with the environmental injustices and racism that communities of color and low-income communities have to deal with. They deal with the safer issues of, you know, protecting the ozone or the rain forests or some other issue. Those are certainly all great, because they affect all of us also, but in terms of their money, their funding sources, those types of environmental issues are more acceptable because they're really not, you know, marching or demonstrating in front of some company or somebody, and they're not really rocking the boat as we have to do in the environmental justice movement. So that gap is still there.

Personally, you know, I never did depend on the big ten or anybody else. My idea has always been to depend on the people who are affected in these communities surrounding these companies to organize to do what we need to do. If anyone else wants to support us in a fair and just, principled way, the big ten or whoever else, fine. Otherwise, we just do what we need to do. So there still hasn't been any coming together in that regard at this point.



Wilmsen: Do you think it would be desirable to have a coming together?

Clark: Well, it probably would be desirable to have some type of coming together and understanding on a principled, respectful basis, but for that to occur, is still somewhat questionable for many reasons. There are a lot of complications. As I understand it, it's not only the issues that some of those organizations address, they may be even accepting money from people who would be considered polluters.

People in the environmental justice movement would not support that or be part of a process where that was occurring, you know, where an organization was receiving money or had somebody on their board or something that was a major problem in our communities and those type of issues and concerns. So there's a lot of complication to it. Obviously any time people come together across classes and races, it's for some common cause of justice. That's certainly a good thing and advantageous to do, but it's quite a complicated process, so it hasn't occurred yet.

Wilmsen: What do you think it would take to bring the mainstream groups and environmental justice groups together?

Clark: Well, what it would probably take is, first of all, some meeting of the minds and understanding in terms of the basis of what that could entail. Certainly, you know, those particular groups, they've been well established, they've got their own agendas, so I don't think that probably under the present situation there's ever going to be any type of real integration or sharing of any type of decision-making in those big ten groups. I don't think that that's going to be occurring, because they are probably appealing to an entirely different clientele than low-income people of color in communities that are primarily part of the environmental justice movement. Those people don't have the resources that those big ten organizations tap into, and they're not probably going to be making any decisions in those organizations. So all of those particular types of questions are there.

I guess in the final end, though, basically any type of support or working with any group would have to be based on, first of all, some principles of respect. Those groups have been written letters, and I don't think that they are, at this time, receptive. But in terms of what it would take, certainly in forming any type of working relationship, they would have to recognize the principles of environmental justice, basically, and the self-determination of the communities in the environmental justice movement—that we make our own decisions in regard to our own lives and communities and anybody that wants to work with that and support that under our leadership, that's fine. You know, we make the decisions and we live the fruits of those decisions or the consequences of those decisions. So that would be the basis of it, based on some respectful, principled working relationship.

But you know, it's probably a long ways before there's any real working together or cooperation, for the simple reason that you have to deal with one of the fundamental issues of respect for other people, period. And people don't even operate on that fundamental basis, so unless you start there, you aren't going to be going far. You can put up a lot of pretense that we're working together, and that we all are sitting in a room together, but when it comes down to it, you know, the people of a certain class or a certain color or a certain wealth, they're going to be running the things and making the

decisions, and the same old racism and classism and divisions among people in the broader society is going to be right there. It's going to work against us working together.

So you need to come with the basic fundamental understanding in the first place that this is based on people, period, you know, and we make decisions in a democratic manner, whoever it is and whatever you look like, and that's the way we go forward together because we all are on this planet and none of us knows better than the other. We need to work together to save humanity on this planet. Until you start from that basis, then you ain't going to be going too far.

Wilmsen: Why do you think the environmental groups haven't been receptive to your overtures—the letters and so on that you've written?

Clark: Basically because they're probably so entrenched in their own thing. Also, in terms of them changing, another thing is, they're not into organizing. They're not into this type of community organizing because they don't think that the community organizing that you have to do in order—especially if you're talking about communities of color who are bearing the brunt of the disproportionate impact that's part of the environmental justice movement. They very well know that you don't get no—this is a racist society, period, whether it's environmental racism or whatever form—they know very well that you ain't getting no justice for no people of color in this society without a fight. You know, period.

We went through the whole period of the sixties and the seventies, when the civil rights movement and all the organizing was around, and people saw first hand, plain and clear how the government and the system would crack down on organizers and peaceful demonstrators. Like they sic dogs on Martin Luther King or jail people or sponsor the FBI counterintelligence program that killed off many Black Panther members and other more militant activists who were fighting for change. So people who have gone through that period have a pretty good perception that protesting and demonstrating in terms of community organizing is not welcome in this society no matter what the state says about freedom of speech or assembly. So many organizations and people have taken the easy way out and are basically trying to avoid that type of confrontation and basically, you know, just do the safer type of work around protecting the rain forest. I'm not knocking that, like I said, because I recognize the role that the rain forests and all of that play, so I'm not knocking that; I'm just saying that I think that there are perceptions about those organizations and that these issues are acceptable to the status quo, to apparently everyone, and so and they could get a lot of money and resources to address these type of issues, whereas when it comes down to, you know, calling a demonstration to protest the Chevron incinerator in North Richmond, the refinery there, the resources and the money and support for that type of organizing is not going to be that easily accessible as what they're doing.

Wilmsen: How would you describe the West County Toxics Coalition's relationship with mainstream environmental groups?

Clark: Well, you know, I figure that at West County Toxics Coalition we have a good relationship with anyone that wants to have a good relationship. I'll put it like that.

We haven't done a whole lot of work with mainstream groups because we pretty much, like I've said, depend on organizing people in the communities here that are affected, you know. In terms of mainstream groups, we did do some work with Greenpeace at one point when they were working and supporting environmental justice, but then they backed out of that, especially in California. They still maintain some work around environmental justice in Louisiana, in the South, but that's perceived pretty much as just a cover. In the final end, it's perceived that they've really backed out and abandoned a lot of the environmental justice community that they were working in, you know, because of changes in the organization and whatever.

But as far as the other groups, there's really been nothing. Like I said, basically the guy from the local Sierra Club, who was at one point involved with us here, that was on an individual basis. We did some work with the Sierra [Club] Legal Defense Fund—which is different than the organization, but some of the same people may be part of the Sierra Club on some legal cases—but that's pretty much the extent of it.

Wilmsen: It's been, what, eight years since the Southwest Organizing Project sent out that letter criticizing the big ten. Do you see now that environmental groups are making more of an effort to come together and work on issues of environmental justice?

Clark: Well, no, not actually. Probably the largest major network was with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, the APEN (Asian Pacific Environmental Network), and in the South, the Southern Organizing Project. I think they helped to form some type of Afro-American environmental justice alliance in the South, but I think the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice was probably the largest and the most active.

### **Founding a National Organization of Afro-American Environmental Justice Activists, 1999**

Clark: When I was in New Orleans, starting from Wednesday of last week until Sunday, primarily African American, black, activists in the environmental justice movement throughout the country were there in New Orleans to discuss forming a national network or national organization of Afro-American environmental activists. And a resolution was passed and a central organizational structure is in place now. There is a steering committee that was formed to help develop the proposal for the national structure. I'm a member of that steering committee and so the next year we'll be developing the formal organizational structure. The organizational structure that will be decided on in the meanwhile will be the vehicle that will be coordinating all—  
[interruption for telephone call]

Wilmsen: You were talking about being on the steering committee of the network.

Clark: Yes, that the steering committee will coordinate all the environmental justice groups throughout the country until the actual organizational structure is formalized and set up. But it's basically occurred and so you know, it's just a matter of the development of the



organizational structure and where are we going. But I think this is quite a historic development for the environmental justice movement.

Wilmsen: What need does this fulfill?

Clark: Well, first of all, for these Afro-American environmental justice activists there was no organizational structure, no type of network like the Southwest Network or the APEN among the Asians, so the Afro-American did not have any type of organizational structure to bring them together. Those particular Afro-American communities throughout this country that are addressing environmental justice issues basically have been scattered about, and some may be part of some network here or there, but by and large, there's no organizational structure that was coordinating Afro-American communities and environmental justice activists. So it fulfills the role to do that and to build a strong national Afro-American environmental justice organization that not only could interact with the other networks, but also maybe to coordinate and serve as a unified voice for Afro-American communities in the country.

Wilmsen: And what are the goals?

Clark: The goal is basically environmental justice. But in terms of the particular activities and so forth, that will be developed as the organizational structure goes through the process. For sure, we feel that it will help to accelerate our efforts of getting environmental justice and holding elected officials and government agencies accountable, and it will help in accelerating the pace of environmental justice in the broader sense. This always has had the potential for being a powerful movement, probably the most powerful movement since the Civil Rights Movement. Now with this development that has occurred, I think it even propels us more so in the unified way toward empowering the environmental justice movement.

Wilmsen: Do you have a name for the new network?

Clark: No, we have not formalized names and structure at this particular time. Because you know, we just met over the weekend.

### **Further Reflections on the "Mainstream" Movement**

Wilmsen: Okay, just two more questions on the mainstream movement. Is there anything that you've done or West County Toxics Coalition has done to help diversify the staffs of the mainstream movement?

Clark: Well, no. As a matter of fact, I really don't devote a lot of time even to dealing with that, other than with the Southwest Network that we're part of and others when we wrote those letters. But I don't focus on that. Like I said, my focus is on organizing people in the communities impacted by these issues.

And I'm making changes. To this date, I've been successful in that particular effort and I don't personally really spend a whole lot of time in dealing with that issue.



Wilmsen: What direction do you see the mainstream movement going in now?

Clark: I think with Earth Day 2000 coming up, probably the mainstream movement that is participating in the Earth Day activities has its whole thrust on “new energy for a new era,” basically to develop the groundswell nationally and internationally to promote renewable energy, you know, and to wean countries off the petrochemical treadmill. That’s the primary thrust that the mainstream is pushing, and that’s certainly a good effort that can benefit all of us.

Though they don’t focus on environmental justice, per se, as part of that, what we’re trying to do locally here is to work with the many groups that are involved in organizing Earth Day here in the San Francisco Bay Area to also include an environmental justice focus.

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Clark: In some of the communities that I work in in this county, there is a concentration of electric power plants or oil refineries that would relate to this new thrust of “new energy for a new era” and would include the environmental justice issues. But many communities don’t necessarily have the oil refineries or they don’t have power plants, and so they’re sort of going on without specifically including an environmental justice component. So the other communities sort of feel left out of this whole thrust around Earth Day 2000.

So that’s pretty much where I think the mainstream—at this particular point, especially with Earth Day 2000 coming up, the major thrust of where all of that’s going—  
[interruption to attend to office business]

Wilmsen: So you’re saying that you feel like you’ve been left out, I mean, the West County Toxics Coalition has been left out of this whole thrust of Earth Day 2000?

Clark: Well, no, I don’t feel that we’ve been left out because we took the initiative and made the effort to work with organizing with environmental justice groups here in the San Francisco Bay Area, so that we would be included in the efforts here. So environmental justice will be a focus and part of the Earth Day activities here in the San Francisco Bay Area, because of our work in ensuring that that happens.

But in terms of on the national level or even on an international level, the Earth Day organization is somewhat doing their own program. Environmental justice is not a theme or a focus of the national or international efforts that organize Earth Day, but locally we fought to include it in the activities that will be going on here in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. It sounds like if the mainstream is starting to focus on energy, then there could be some potential for future cooperation.

Clark: Well, yes, there’s potential for future cooperation, but you know, the thing is that, here again, it comes down to dealing with a lot of the issues relating to decision making and resource questions. You know, how decisions are going to be made in terms of the agenda, or how decisions are going to be made in a democratic way. How are the

resource allocations going to be? Those are some of the primary questions, so you know, even though you're working on the same issues, or the issues that may affect everyone, you still have to deal with those issues right there.

Basically the mainstream groups usually don't have any people of color on their boards of directors and they usually are well-resourced, financed. So they can't just make decisions that affect my life and my community. They get resources to address the issues that affect my life and my community, but those resources don't trickle down to the West County Toxics Coalition for us to do no organizing and education in our community. So in terms of democracy, in terms of decision making and resource allocation, even though you could be working on the common issues that affect all of us, you still have to deal with those questions which are major primary questions.

### **A Summary of the Success of the West County Toxics Coalition**

Wilmsen: Okay, those are all my questions. Is there anything else you want to talk about or anything you want to add?

Clark: Not really, just to say that as far as the West County Toxics Coalition is concerned, I think that our vision has been plain and clear. This major piece with the county, to get the county to adopt these principles of environmental justice, to me, is like putting the icing on the environmental justice cake. When we make that happen, I think that my work, personally, in this movement is pretty much, in a major way, I can say complete, because we pretty much have done all that. We laid the foundation and pretty much brought the situation under control: we have addressed not only future development, but have something in place to protect our residents and communities as we go forward into the next century. We've also laid the basis of how to deal with companies and prevent accidents and make the present situation safer. And so we have a model here that we take around the country and the world, and other people learn what's going on here.

I think that on a local and county level, that we have made historic and miraculous strides. And I think that now with this forming of this new national environmental justice organization of Afro-American activists, I think that that will serve the potential to do some major work on a national and international level, possibly similar to what we have modeled here in Richmond, Contra Costa County.

Wilmsen: How do you assess the environment for the people, the residents in the communities here in Richmond now?

Clark: I think that, in terms of the environment here, it's probably a lot different and better in many ways than it was before we started. First of all, you have a warning system in place to alert residents of chemical disasters and communicate with residents, which wasn't here. You have more sensitivity to environmental issues and concerns and causes of health problems. You have people who probably are more likely now to be organized around environmental issues. The quality of the environment certainly has improved as the incinerator that Chevron had operated since 1967, the entire permit has been eliminated; the refinery is operating, but has reduced a lot of emissions due to

them having to repair leaking pumps and valves and do other toxic reduction measures there. The risk from the Chevron Ortho Agriculture Facility that stored big tanks of anhydrous ammonia near North Richmond is no longer there. So the major risks have been eliminated; the air quality has improved; the residents' awareness of environmental issues and health has improved.

We have a health institution, the North Richmond Center for Health that's there in North Richmond that serves a major area here. It has an environmental education and outreach component that can continue to take forward the environmental health forums and sponsor those and provide environmental education to residents. Right now, we just recently interviewed and plan to hire three environmental educators to operate out of the environmental education outreach portion of the center. So with all of those risk management and prevention programs in place in the county, and with all of those particular activities that we have been involved in, I think that the quality of the environment is better now than it ever has been.

Wilmsen: That sounds like a good summation, a good place to stop.

Clark: Sure, sure.

Transcriber: Amelia Archer

Final Typist: Steve Stine





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Environmental Justice and Grassroots Environmentalism  
in the San Francisco Bay Area

Ahmadia Thomas

FROM WELFARE RIGHTS TO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Interview Conducted by  
Carl Wilmsen  
in 2000

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Ahmadia Thomas





## TABLE OF CONTENTS--Ahmadia Thomas

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	79
Volunteer for VISTA, 1970-1972	83
Moving to California, 1974	88
Becoming Active in the Citizens Action League and ACORN	90
Learning about Toxic Wastes in Richmond	93
Forming West County Toxics Coalition, 1982, and Other Volunteer Work	95
Cleaning up Point Isabel, Polling City Council Members, and Protecting an Elementary School	99
Chaplain with the Richmond Police Department	102
Negotiating with Chevron	104
Demonstrating for Jesse Jackson in the South, and Other Action	109
The Present Condition of the Environment in Richmond, and Cooperating with Other Environmental Groups	114



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University of California  
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Chimadea Thomas  
 Date of birth 2-17-28 Birthplace Lanville Ga  
 Father's full name Abdul Ghafor  
 Occupation laborer Birthplace Tennessee  
 Mother's full name Amatul Ghafor  
 Occupation home maker Birthplace Lanville Ga  
 Your spouse James R. Thomas  
 Occupation Construction Worker Birthplace Arkansas  
 Your children All grown up 8 all out  
of state except one he lives with me  
 Where did you grow up? In Pittsburgh Pennsylvania  
 Present community I now live in Richmond Va since 1974  
 Education I went to the 11th grade  
Attended Community College and Bible College  
 Occupation(s) part time office manager  
at West County Topics Coalition  
 Areas of expertise Writing leadership school  
Church secretary for Sunday school  
Ordained Minister Police Chaplain  
 Other interests or activities involved with Richmond Police  
R.S.V. Castore Star. School Volunteer  
and mentor for children.  
 Organizations in which you are active West County Topics Coalition  
Acorn in Oakland Police Chaplain  
 SIGNATURE Chimadea Thomas DATE: 6-29-2000





## INTERVIEW WITH AHMADIA THOMAS

**Growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

[Date of Interview: February 22, 2000] ##<sup>1</sup>

Wilmsen: Today is February 22, 2000, and this is the first interview with Mrs. Ahmadia [pronounced AH-muh-dee] Thomas.

I thought we could just begin and talk a little bit about your family background and personal influences on you while you were growing up, and then get into your education and your early career, and then move on into coming to California and all that you've done here. My first question is when and where were you born?

Thomas: I was born in Danville, Virginia, February 17, 1928. My mother brought me to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, when I was an infant, and that's where I got my education, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Wilmsen: What did your parents do for a living?

Thomas: Oh, my mother was—I guess you'd call it a homemaker. She worked out of the house. She did housework and cooked for doctors, like that. My dad—I don't remember what he did too much. I think he did laborer work. My mother was born in Virginia, too. My grandmother was born in Virginia, too, and my grandmother was Cherokee Indian.

Wilmsen: Oh! And where did your father's folks come from?

Thomas: My father's folks came from Tennessee.

Wilmsen: Okay. What do you consider the most important influences on you while you were growing up?

Thomas: Well, the important influences were I remember my mother punishing me, but she never spanked me. She always put me in the stairway going down to the—we had a basement, and she'd put me out there to stand, but she never spanked me. I must not have done nothing real bad! And I remember my dad worked. My mother stayed home and kept house, but she took me to work with her. She worked for a doctor named Sankey in Wilksburg, Pennsylvania. She worked for a doctor. He was a medical doctor. His name was Sankey. She took me to work with her every day.

Wilmsen: How do you spell Sankey?

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1. This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

- Thomas: S-a-n-k-e-y. And she was, like, a homekeeper there. You know, cooked, and when they had company, she'd cook big dinners, and I was with her at work. I remember that real well because the doctor used to take me on his lap [laughs].
- Wilmsen: What was it like growing up in Pittsburgh?
- Thomas: Nice. Growing up there was wonderful. I don't remember no bad times. We had plenty of food. I never was hungry; I never was clothes-less; I never was homeless. Mother raised eleven children.
- Wilmsen: Wow. Did you live in the same house?
- Thomas: No, we moved quite a few times. When the flood was in '36, we moved from the lower part of Pittsburgh—down in the strip district—we moved to another part, but then I don't remember too much about that. Then I came out here, you know. My mother raised all of us in Pittsburgh. There was eleven of us. She raised the children in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- Wilmsen: And that was during the Depression, too, while you were growing up.
- Thomas: I don't remember the Depression. We survived. We survived. I never remember not having food.
- Wilmsen: That's great. What were your favorite activities?
- Thomas: Well, then I was active in school. When I was going to school, I was a Girl Reserve. I always did something. I was always doing work. Something like you watch kids come out. And then when I was off from school, I went to the YMCA and helped them in there with the coats and put them up and everything. When they danced, I wouldn't dance; I just put their clothes and things up, the people who came in. I always was doing something.
- Wilmsen: Did you say Girl Reserves?
- Thomas: Girl Reserves, yes. That's what they called it.
- Wilmsen: Is that like the Girl Scouts?
- Thomas: Something like that, yes.
- Wilmsen: So it's a service type of organization?
- Thomas: Yes, community service.
- Wilmsen: What kinds of community service?
- Thomas: Well, I went to the dances at the Y and I would hang the kids' coats up and just watch them dance, when they come out.
- Wilmsen: That was part of the—

- Thomas: Community work.
- Wilmsen: —Girl Reserves.
- Thomas: Yes. And then in the school, I did something, too. I helped out in the school, doing something. I forget what it's called. I was always busy [laughs].
- Wilmsen: What do you remember about the physical environment in Pittsburgh?
- Thomas: It was all right then. There were a lot of steel mills, but I don't remember having no pollution. I lived right next to the steel mill. I could look through the thick glass window and see all that steel, hot steel. My back faced it.
- Wilmsen: You could actually see the molten steel?
- Thomas: [nods head, yes]
- Wilmsen: Wow. And did you have any interest in the environment in those days?
- Thomas: Not then, not then. No interest.
- Wilmsen: How about books or music?
- Thomas: Well, I drew a lot. I could draw, just look at something and draw it. But I never did a lot of reading. But I did sing a lot and write poetry and draw. I loved to draw, draw pictures.
- Wilmsen: When World War II came along, you must have been in high school then.
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: What kind of influence did that have on you?
- Thomas: I think in World War II I was still in elementary. In '41. I was still in elementary. Then I went to high school.
- Wilmsen: So while the war was going, you went to high school.
- Thomas: Yes, while the war was going. I was in school. [Interruption for telephone call]
- Wilmsen: Were there any books or any music or anything like that—?
- Thomas: I wasn't into book reading, and I wasn't interested in music. I was real good at notes and reading, but I wasn't interested in too much of that then. I was mostly into volunteering, like I'm doing now. More into volunteering. I wasn't into books too much. So I didn't do too much. In fact, we didn't read a lot then. We didn't read a lot then.
- Wilmsen: So you were more into doing things, rather than reading.

- Thomas: That's right.
- Wilmsen: Was religion an important influence?
- Thomas: Well, my mother raised me in the Baptist church. In fact, we became united with the Baptist church in Pittsburgh, and I went to Baptist church till I came out here. In fact, I came out here and went to Baptist church. My mother raised us in the church. She was always active in church. But she was a Muslim. We were raised as Muslims. My dad was Muslim, but she still went to church. I was raised a Muslim, so I wasn't into Christianity at all.
- Wilmsen: But you went to a Baptist church.
- Thomas: Yes, I did.
- Wilmsen: Can you describe a little bit about how that affected your religious education?
- Thomas: It didn't affect me a whole lot till I got grown. [laughs] Then I told people, "You know, I wasn't raised that a-way," but then I ended up, when I got grown, another way; but when you're raised a certain way, you have to go by your parents'—you know, what they believe in. You listen to them when you're home. But when you're grown up it's a different story. So I went along. I was really into that. A long time.
- Wilmsen: Was it because there were no mosques in Pittsburgh?
- Thomas: Some small ones.
- Wilmsen: But why did they send you to a Christian church?
- Thomas: I don't know why my mother changed. I never asked her.
- Wilmsen: Oh, I see. She converted.
- Thomas: Yes. But I never asked her.
- Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Okay.
- Thomas: Yes. That's what my son asked me once, and I couldn't tell him. That was just a question mark then. See, I didn't talk about it. That's the difference.
- Wilmsen: And then you went to high school.
- Thomas: High school.
- Wilmsen: Were you active in volunteering during high school also?
- Thomas: I don't remember being too active in high school. I was into the books more then [laughs]. I didn't get too active in high school. I don't remember being real active. In elementary I got real active.



Wilmsen: Then what did you do after high school?

Thomas: After school I married, but I didn't marry until I was twenty-one.

Wilmsen: Did you go to college?

Thomas: I had jobs, in fact, in between that. I went to school—worked in the hospital, I did housework, I did all types of domestic work after I got out of school and was grown. Then I worked in the hospital.

Wilmsen: What did you do in the hospital?

Thomas: Nurse aide. At that time you could work while you were young—and I got paid. I worked part-time after school, and I was a nurse aide. They trained me how to take care of patients. But I did only what the aides did. It wasn't what the nurses did.

Wilmsen: That's while you were still in high school?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: And then did you go to college?

Thomas: I didn't go to college in Pennsylvania at all. I came out here and went to community college, then I went to Patten College. It's a bible college, a community college.

Wilmsen: Okay. We can talk about that when we get to California.

Thomas: Yes, yes.

### **Volunteer for VISTA, 1970-1972**

Wilmsen: Tell me about becoming a VISTA volunteer.

Thomas: I went to VISTA in Washington, D.C., first time, training, and the government paid all our expenses there and back. We stayed in the dormitories, and they paid for our food and everything, and I was in VISTA two years. I went to VISTA once and stayed in a year and went back one more year, and I couldn't go back in no more. Two years.

Wilmsen: What prompted you to decide to become a VISTA volunteer?

Thomas: Because I thought I could do more in the community when I came back, by being trained.

Wilmsen: What kinds of things?

Thomas: They trained us about the welfare rights manual, how to read the manual and the rights of a recipient. They taught us how to conduct a hearing and how to sit in on a hearing

when the recipient needed you in. I had to sit in with people that were due welfare and listen to their case. We did all that. And I even delivered checks to people's houses. They let me take the checks.

Wilmsen: Oh, yes? So basically it was resolving disputes about welfare.

Thomas: That's right. Whether they were due welfare or not, whether they were eligible or not. I sat in on a lot of cases.

One woman was an actress, and her time had run out for being an actress, and she came to get on welfare. That was interesting.

Wilmsen: Was she eligible?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: What year was that approximately?

Thomas: [pauses] Welfare rights. Let me see. 1970. I guess you'd say around, '70, yes.

Wilmsen: And you did that for two years.

Thomas: Yes, two years. I went in, trained in Washington, and I applied for it again and went back in. That was it. They didn't let me go but twice.

Wilmsen: All of your work, then, was in Pittsburgh.

Thomas: Yes, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Welfare rights.

Wilmsen: Welfare rights. What did you do once you were finished with your training?

Thomas: We would come back to the community, and they had an office already there. We just worked out of the office. Had our own desk and our own phone, and we worked out of an office, like going into work at an office, and big demonstrations. We'd have meetings in our office concerning people's cases. We worked with a lot of officials, but I don't know who they were then. It was top people who had to do with the welfare. We even demonstrated in offices. We used to go into offices and sit in when we thought they wasn't doing right in offices, and workers got nervous [laughs].

Wilmsen: As a volunteer you would demonstrate?

Thomas: Demonstrate.

Wilmsen: What were some of the issues?

Thomas: Well, money, the income, a lot of things—whether they were eligible or not. And you know, we'd look at the manual and see whether they were eligible; the manual would tell you what they were due and all that. That was a big—and we were allowed to look in the manual.

- Wilmsen: Sometimes the officials weren't following the manual? Is that what you mean?
- Thomas: That's right, that's right.
- Wilmsen: I see. And how did they respond to your—
- Thomas: Because we had demonstrations—going to offices and sitting in. We would talk to the head person, and then they would give us the okay to sit in on cases because then we could sit in. We could listen to it. From the recipient's—and then work it.
- Wilmsen: I see. So you won the right to sit in and kind of audit the cases.
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: Oh, I see. That's interesting.
- Thomas: And we had our office set up everywhere. Like, we had different buildings we could use as a welfare office. If we had an office here, we had a VISTA volunteer in the office, every office.
- Wilmsen: You had a VISTA volunteer in every office?
- Thomas: So you didn't get away with nothing.
- Wilmsen: Did they change the manual at all?
- Thomas: No, I don't remember changing it. [laughs] They didn't change it.
- Wilmsen: So you guys held them accountable to the manual.
- Thomas: Yes, everything.
- Wilmsen: I see. And what did you do when you were done working for VISTA?
- Thomas: Well, after I got through working with VISTA—I had other jobs on the side. See, I did more than one thing. I had jobs I went to in the week, when I wasn't doing that. I didn't volunteer like I do now, at the hospital and like that. I had side jobs that helped make money to keep my family going. See, I did, like, day work, and I got paid right then.
- Wilmsen: What kind of jobs were those?
- Thomas: Domestic work, in between. It was hard then.
- Wilmsen: At people's houses.
- Thomas: I did the floors. You know, I worked for Jews. They worked you like a slave. You were tired when you left there. A lot of Jews. And that part of Pittsburgh was called Squirrel Hill. All the Jews lived out there.
- Wilmsen: You were going to—

- Thomas: Domestic work.
- Wilmsen: —people's houses.
- Thomas: Yes, doing work.
- Wilmsen: Okay. What was your overall impression of working for VISTA?
- Thomas: Oh, it made me feel good because I knew I was doing something to help my community and help other people and reach out to them. I loved that because I had contact with a lot of people.
- Wilmsen: What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of—
- Thomas: Well, the strengths were letting the recipients know that they had a right. I think the down side of it was a lot didn't know they had a right until they came to us because they didn't know there was a manual that had rights in it. But most times, once they left there, they had something, you know. We helped them. They were never let down; we always helped. That's the good side about it: helping them and knowing I did something that helped humanity because that stayed a long, long time and then it went out—welfare rights—when the government stopped paying for it. The government paid that. That money was paid by VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America. Volunteers, but they'd pay us. And there was an agreement made when we went in there that they would not bother any money that we had coming from the social services. They didn't touch our money.
- Wilmsen: You mean—
- Thomas: They couldn't touch our money.
- Wilmsen: Who couldn't?
- Thomas: Social service.
- Wilmsen: Oh, okay. I see.
- Thomas: Go in training and come back, and they couldn't touch our money. That was the agreement made.
- Wilmsen: What did you think of the welfare system at that time?
- Thomas: I think it was real good then because they got the money they was due. And they didn't cut the people off that's due, just like now, they cut them all off. But I think it's a good thing because people who didn't have any training had to have something to live on with children—and the children would starve—so that was good then. But this is a different era now.
- Wilmsen: What did you see as the major weaknesses of welfare?



Thomas: If people get on there and stay on there and never look for a job. That's the weakness. Try to improve yourself. You be on there so long, and then you try to improve yourself: go to college or whatever training you can get to get off of it, because nobody got on there to stay on it, I'm sure.

Wilmsen: Did you see many cases of people who successfully trained themselves and got off?

Thomas: Yes, got off. Doing good.

Wilmsen: Were you able to help people do that?

Thomas: Yes, I was. We had job training then, too, but I don't remember what the name was. And we had different programs they could get in and train. You learned while you were making money, paid to learn. That was good. On-the-job training. But they paid you.

Wilmsen: Was that part of the rights that you informed people about, was their right to training—

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: —that maybe they weren't aware of?

Thomas: That's right.

Wilmsen: And then somewhere in there you mentioned you got married?

Thomas: Yes, I got married on April the 7th—no, it wasn't April. It was May, 1970.

Wilmsen: So right about the same time you were a VISTA volunteer.

Thomas: Yes. I got married, again. The first time. Because the second time I got married was '74.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay. Was your first husband a VISTA volunteer?

Thomas: No. He didn't even get involved in the community and do nothing. He'd just sit back and watch me [laughs]. He never did nothing.

Wilmsen: He wasn't interested.

Thomas: No, he wasn't interested.

Wilmsen: And then what about your second husband?

Thomas: My second husband wasn't interested, either.

Wilmsen: Oh, he wasn't, either?

Thomas: No [laughs].

Wilmsen: What did he do?

- Thomas: I think he did work like United Parcel.
- Wilmsen: He's the one you're still married to?
- Thomas: Yes. He's sick now, though.
- Wilmsen: Yes, you told me that last time I saw you. Did you have kids?
- Thomas: I had eight. All living. Four boys and four girls.
- Wilmsen: Oh, wow! Do you have grandkids?
- Thomas: Yes, I have nine of them, and I have about three great-grand.
- Wilmsen: You have a big family.
- Thomas: Back East. Pennsylvania.
- Wilmsen: What was it like trying to raise a family and work and be a volunteer?
- Thomas: Again, it wasn't hard. I don't know. It didn't seem to me hard. There just weren't any hardships on me. Just the Lord brought us through it. I raised all of them, and they never was out of food or out of clothing. Somebody always come forward with clothing for me or something.
- Wilmsen: Did you take your kids to work with you?
- Thomas: No, I didn't. I took them to church. I didn't take them to work because where I worked I couldn't take them. I'd leave them with their daddy because at that time he was a bit sick and he'd watch the children. But when I went to church, I took all of them.

#### **Moving to California, 1974**

- Wilmsen: Then you moved to California.
- Thomas: In 1974.
- Wilmsen: In 1974. And what prompted you to move out here?
- Thomas: Because my husband's daddy was getting up in age. He wanted to be near his dad because his dad was getting up in age, so he came right here.
- Wilmsen: This was your second husband.
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: And was he originally from here, your husband?

- Thomas: No, he was originally from Arkansas.
- Wilmsen: Oh, how did it come about that—
- Thomas: His dad came to Richmond, California, and built a house and a home and set up housekeeping and was working for a while. But then when he got older, my husband said, "I need to be near my dad, since he's getting older." So I said, "Well, when do you want to go?" And this was a miracle: money came in there for me to send him right that day—right at the time he wanted to go. He rode the airplane. He came out here to see him. And I was back East.
- Wilmsen: Oh, I see.
- Thomas: He came out first and then sent me out.
- Wilmsen: And then you brought the whole family out here. When did your father-in-law move out here?
- Thomas: Oh, he came out here in the fifties.
- Wilmsen: In the fifties.
- Thomas: Yes. Forties or fifties, I don't know. [laughs] A long time.
- Wilmsen: What did he do here?
- Thomas: I guess he did regular work. I don't know what he did here, but he retired. When my husband came out about that time, his dad was retired. When he came out, his dad had retired. His dad was in the seventies or sixties or something. His dad died out here.
- Wilmsen: So your husband, then, didn't grow up with his father.
- Thomas: He grew up with his father, but he left home at an early age, which I don't understand. He says he left home at fifteen. Nobody will normally leave home that young. I told him, "I don't think kids will leave home until they're ready," and fifteen is a teenager. He said he left home early for some reason. I didn't leave home early. I don't know why. I think years ago boys did leave home early, for whatever reason. They wanted to be out on their own, but it's rough out there.
- Wilmsen: Yes.
- Thomas: Fifteen years old.
- Wilmsen: What were your impressions of California when you first came out here?
- Thomas: Didn't like it.
- Wilmsen: You didn't like it?
- Thomas: My children didn't like it.

Wilmsen: Why not?

Thomas: Because it wasn't like Pennsylvania. This is a big difference out here. See, they were used to growing up in Pennsylvania, and they said—my boys said—"I want to go back to Pittsburgh. I want to go back." So one of them—the youngest—did go back and stayed and got a job. He went back when he got grown.

Wilmsen: What was it that they didn't like about living here?

Thomas: I don't know what it was. Maybe it was the weather or the people or something. They didn't like California. They told me that.

Wilmsen: But did you like it?

Thomas: Not that much, but since his dad was out here, I moved out here. I really didn't want to come to California because I didn't know anything about it.

Wilmsen: Well, it's hard to uproot yourself.

Thomas: It's hard to do that, that's right.

Wilmsen: Yes. What did you do when you got here?

Thomas: Oh, he had got an apartment, furnished it up. I got involved with the school. Got my sons in school. I got registered with the election board so I could get working on the poll. I did everything I did back there, on the poll. I worked every town election. And I got involved with the community and slowly started to find out what was happening and got involved in the community.

Wilmsen: And that was here in Richmond.

Thomas: Yes.

### **Becoming Active in the Citizens Action League and ACORN**

Wilmsen: Okay. Tell me about getting involved in the Citizens Action League and the Association [of Community Organizations for Reform Now] [ACORN].

Thomas: Oh, that was an organization that started in Boston. I forgot that Williams man's name. He came from Boston and was coming through Richmond. He was talking about toxics and all, in Boston. And he came, and we ended up getting a fellow to work in this office to start a West County Toxics Coalition. He was a white fellow. He came from Boston.

Wilmsen: Was that John O'Connor?



Thomas: Yes, O'Connor, but another man came, worked in the office. John O'Connor was the one that started it. But another man worked before Mr. O'Connor came. His name was Craig Williams.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay. But that was in what? The mid-eighties or something.

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: But you were here for quite a few years, maybe ten years or so?

Thomas: Yes, something like that, before I got involved with that Citizens Action. We had members all over the state, members like in Central Richmond, Oakland, Compton, and all those places. Every little town had a group of people. They had VISTA volunteers working in those areas then. It was called Citizens Action League, but it really was a spinoff from ACORN. That's another organization it was a spinoff from. ACORN. And it's still active in Oakland.

Wilmsen: Before you got active in that, what kind of community organizations were you active in?

Thomas: Back East I was in VISTA, and that was in organizing welfare rights and all. When I come out here, when I found out about Citizens Action League, I got involved with them, and I became active. They had people in different areas of California. A group here, a group central, north, south—you know, all over. We had little groups, and we'd meet together and have a rally about two or three times a year. They came from Compton, all those people from overseas called—what are they called? It's a name. They're big people. They look like Hawaiians.

Wilmsen: Samoans?

Thomas: Samoans. We were with them. A big bus-load of Samoans would come over. We'd have rallies and everything. They were real nice. And they had a chief. See, I know the Samoans when I see them, because they used to come right up and speak to me: "I'm from Samoa." And we learned to do the dances. We'd have performers performing, and they'd get up on stage and do dances like the Hawaiians. It was real nice. We had a lot of rallies for them, all over the state. And I was state secretary for six years. I took minutes every meeting we went.

Wilmsen: Now, this was—

Thomas: Citizens Action. I was state secretary.

Wilmsen: When did you get involved with them, approximately?

Thomas: When it first formed, because we were Citizens Action League, and then after that died out, we went into West County Toxics Coalition. The Citizens Action League was the first organization that worked out of this office.

Wilmsen: Oh, so it was active for maybe six years before—

- Thomas: That's right.
- Wilmsen: —the West County Toxics Coalition.
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: I see. Okay. So it was organizers from back East—
- Thomas: Well, the people were organizing out here, but there were other people that got involved. It really started organizing here in this state. I don't know about Citizens Action back East. It didn't start back East. It started here.
- Wilmsen: Oh, it started here.
- Thomas: Yes, because there was no Citizens Action League when I was back there. It was called VISTA, and it was called welfare rights back there, but then when I moved out here, I became involved in the community and that's how I found out about Citizens Action.
- Wilmsen: What kinds of issues were you dealing with?
- Thomas: We worked on issues like landlord and abandoned houses and abandoned lots that weeds grow up in, and stoplights and street signs and all that. We got involved with that. We did a lot of actions, too.
- Wilmsen: Were you involved in any environmental issues?
- Thomas: Not then. Wasn't too many environmental issues. But after that, you know, it was pretty—there wasn't nothing about the environment at first.
- Wilmsen: What were your impressions of the environment here?
- Thomas: Well, when I first came here, I didn't know. Then I used to smell this terrible odor, and I said, "What's that?" And my husband said, "Well, we done smelt it all the time. We ain't never made no kick about it." But they didn't know what they were smelling. And they were terrible odors: you know ones that smell like sulfur once in a while. There were terrible odors out here, after I got out here. When I first came, I don't remember smelling all this stuff, but boy, after I was out here a while, I really got environmentally conscious. And then when they started having the accidents—whoo! There was always a fire or accident. It would be on the TV or in the paper: "There was an accident, but there wasn't no harm to your health." And that ain't true! [laughs] Got to hearing that.
- Wilmsen: So all that was going on when you first got here?
- Thomas: Yes, but nobody was doing nothing.
- Wilmsen: Tell me about ACORN. What's ACORN?
- Thomas: ACORN is active yet. They do work on things like bank issues, street issues, crime areas, street signs and stop signs. ACORN works on a lot of issues. And banking is one

of their main issues. They call it redlining when the banks in certain areas—you can't get credit, you know, like get a loan or something. And they work real close with the banks and did a lot of actions on the banks. I haven't talked to them lately, but I know they're working on something now over there in Oakland. I don't call them that often, and I don't get over there like I used to because somebody had to come pick me up. But they're still active in Oakland.

Wilmsen: You were active with them at the same time you were active in the Citizens Action League?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: But they were two separate organizations?

Thomas: It's the same thing. But since we were in Richmond, we called it Citizen Action League, but we're a spinoff from ACORN, really from that organization.

### **Learning about Toxic Wastes in Richmond**

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Tell me then, about how you got interested in environmental issues and toxics.

Thomas: John O'Connor came here with that big old truck and those cans. He had trucks and he had cans, and he was checking the environment. He came, met with us, and we had a press conference, and it was a big thing. And then we found out we had toxics in our area, and we had demonstrations on that land and everything. Some of it has been tarred over now. Some has been covered over, over there in North Richmond. They covered that thing over. People were living right next to where all the pollution was in the ground, and they was living there. People were digging up iron, and didn't know they had pollution in the ground. There were a lot of things there.

Wilmsen: Was that affecting people's health?

Thomas: Oh, yes, but they didn't know it then. I know somebody who used to dig up the iron, and now they're sick. They have a real serious breathing problem. They dug that iron up, but they didn't know what was in their soil, see. They were just digging it up and selling it.

Wilmsen: What were they digging up?

Thomas: Iron.

Wilmsen: Iron?

Thomas: Yes. But, see, the soil was contaminated, but they didn't know it. I know people personally who did it. Now they have breathing problems.

Wilmsen: Was it scrap iron?

Thomas: Scrap.

Wilmsen: That was just left in the soil. And they'd dig it up and sell it.

Thomas: They didn't know that it was contaminated, that soil over there. In that very area. They tarred it off. They paved it off. There was a house right next to it. People lived in the house. And some of them had died of cancer, in that same big house, right there on the land.

Wilmsen: Where would they dig up the iron?

Thomas: Take it to the place and sell it. It was valuable.

Wilmsen: Was it in their own backyard?

Thomas: No, no. That was over there in another part of the neighborhood, where all this contaminated soil was, where they found the iron. So they all called the other people, and everybody was digging it up.

Wilmsen: Who owned the land?

Thomas: I forget. I forget the name.

Wilmsen: Okay. But whoever owned it let people go and dig—

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Thomas: They didn't know they were doing it.

Wilmsen: Who was the landowner?

Thomas: Drew, Drew Salvage. But they capped that land over with concrete. Drew Salvage. That was the name of that landlord. We had a press conference on that bare ground before they paved it over. They paved it with concrete.

Wilmsen: How did you become aware that the soil was contaminated?

Thomas: I don't know how we learned about it. They talked about that land, and then somebody—I don't know whether it was tests that was taken or what—discovered there was contaminated soil over in that area, a lot of it. It was a scrap yard. Drew Salvage—it was scrap.

Wilmsen: Was that at Point Isabel?

Thomas: No, that's a different area.

Wilmsen: Okay, I'll get to that in a minute. Now, this was in North Richmond?

- Thomas: This area [pointing to location on map], I'm talking about. It's still over there, but they paved it over.
- Wilmsen: This was while you were still involved with CAL-ACORN?
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: How did you get funding for CAL-ACORN?
- Thomas: Through grants. I don't know who the grant writer was, but we got grants from different organizations.
- Wilmsen: But you had someone who did the grant writing?
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: What other community organizations were involved in ACORN?
- Thomas: The only ones I know was the ones that—they all said ACORN, but they were different sections of the city that were all divided, like central Richmond, North Richmond, South Richmond, and Oakland. Oakland had an office. And Tim Sampson was the one who was involved with us then. His name was Tim Sampson. He's a teacher over at the college. He was involved with us in the Citizens Action League.
- Wilmsen: They were—
- Thomas: Members. We had a lot of members.
- Wilmsen: Community groups.
- Thomas: Yes, a lot of community groups.
- Wilmsen: I see, okay. What prompted you to form a toxics subcommittee?
- Thomas: When John O'Connor came over here from Boston and let us know there were toxics in this area and there were hot spots, which means they're big spots. They call them hot spots. And we got involved right then when they came in that truck from Boston.
- Wilmsen: How did you get in touch with him?
- Thomas: I don't know. I think the man that was the director here then contacted him and had him come into Richmond, and we had the press conference that day. Yes, he was our director then. His name was Craig Williams.

### **Forming West County Toxics Coalition, 1982, and Other Volunteer Work**

- Wilmsen: Okay. What did you do after John O'Connor came?



Thomas: We formed a group: the West County Toxics Coalition. Then we got grants and we started to put literature out, and we had a director. The first man was Mr. Williams, and then Mr. Clark was our second director for West County Toxics Coalition. In the meantime. He wasn't here then. He came in afterwards, after the guy left. Went on somewhere.

Wilmsen: And what was your role?

Thomas: I was a member then. And then after that I became a board member, then chairperson. Mr. Ernie [Ernest] Witt [Senior] got very sick at that time, and he appointed me chair because he was too sick to serve as head of the organization, and he was traveling back and forth to Boston and everything until he got sick. He appointed me chair because he was too sick with the liver problems to be able to work. So he appointed me chair, and I became chair. But after I became chair, I was elected to be an office manager, so I had to give that position up. It was a conflict of interest. So that made me staff. I couldn't be a board member. So I hadn't thought about that, you know. But I kept that chair a long time. And now I'm just a staff person.

Wilmsen: I see. What was Ernie Witt's role?

Thomas: He represented our organization in Boston and everything. He traveled, Ernie Witt. He was the chairperson.

Wilmsen: But Mr. Williams was—

Thomas: Executive director.

Wilmsen: I see. What were some of the other toxics issues that you worked on at that time?

Thomas: There were hot spots, and spills like they used to have; they had one lately. Memberships, worked on that to get members. And we had meetings all over. We met with Chevron. We met with the big spill we had, General Chemical. We met with all officials: city council; we checked them out. We polled them one time to see who all was for cleaning up the environment, and we found out who was who. The mayor said she was interested, and some of the members of the council. We polled them one time. Every city council member that came in, I was supposed to get their ideas on how they felt about toxics. So that was a big issue, and we had big, big, big meetings all over the place. The city council members was getting involved there.

Wilmsen: When was that?

Thomas: That was when we first started. We found out whether the mayor was interested. At the time it wasn't the same mayor. There's another mayor now. We checked the city council members to see if they were going to help us get this environment cleaned up. Most of them said they were. I polled them because I went into City Hall one night when they was having a meeting. So I was on the first floor; time they come in the door, I polled them. I talked to them. That was interesting.

And I also with the city council asked for \$20,000 to help with Legal Aid upstairs, and they gave it to me. But I was with them, too.

Wilmsen: Oh, you worked for them, too?

Thomas: Yes. I used to. Twelve years.

Wilmsen: What kinds of things did you do for them?

Thomas: I was a board member there, trustee. Well, we decided on things like—in fact, they merged now. We worked on that merger a whole year, and they ended up merging another way [laughs]. A whole year. See, I was on the board twelve years.

Wilmsen: Who did they merge with?

Thomas: They merged with—I don't know—the San Francisco Foundation or something, some other organization in San Francisco. They say they're going to keep their office, but they merged, so there'll be a different transaction, you know, through computers and all that. A new thing. Because I was on there twelve years, and they gave me an award in December, on my last day.

Wilmsen: You showed me that when I was in—

Thomas: I was with the RSVP twelve years, too.

Wilmsen: Who?

Thomas: Retired Senior Volunteer Program.

Wilmsen: What did you do for them?

Thomas: Served lunches and cleaned tables and prepared for lunches and served seniors until I got a job; then I had to stop doing that. I was with them twelve years. I went to Concord every second Tuesday to represent the site where we eat from, Site Twenty-Two.

Wilmsen: And where is Site Twenty-Two?

Thomas: That's down there in Nevins Center. It's the senior lunch down there. Every day they feed, five days a week. Senior lunch at a discount price. Nutrition lunch.

Wilmsen: Okay. So you'd go to Concord?

Thomas: I'm supposed to go represent if my alternate doesn't go. I have an alternate now that goes to Concord. When I started, I went twelve years. Nobody wanted to go.

Wilmsen: What's in Concord?

Thomas: The menu meeting.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. And then the Legal Aid.

Thomas: Legal Aid. I was on their board twelve years because I got involved with them because they needed a Gray Panther to sit on their board, and somebody appointed me. I stayed on there twelve years. I was a Gray Panther.

Wilmsen: Did you help with fund raising with them?

Thomas: Well, no, not too much. We had a fund raiser who was hired to do just fund raising. But I was supposed to sit on the board and make decisions about legal aid and, you know, sometimes we'd go on retreats, and like that. Once in a while we'd go on a retreat or training.

Wilmsen: But the decisions on legal aid were—

Thomas: Board members made decisions.

Wilmsen: On what kind of cases to take?

Thomas: No, we didn't talk too much about that. We talked about where we got grants from and what cases they won, but we didn't mention names. It was confidential, you know, when they won something. They didn't have no name there, but they said what they accomplished. And we had to sign for certain monies that come in, certain money we're supposed to get—board members had to sign for it.

Wilmsen: I see. Okay. So back to the CAL-ACORN and the toxics.

Thomas: Well, CAL-ACORN faded out because we had a misfortune. Something happened that I don't know who had control over what happened. But [speaks almost in a whisper] there was some money got taken, and we had to pay it back because there wasn't any more money there to run the office. So we just phased out and went right into West County Toxics Coalition. Something happened. And I don't know to this day what happened. We had some people owed some monies, and it just disappeared. Some people was owed important monies, and it disappeared in San Francisco. I don't know what happened. And that person went scot free! An office person took the money and left town.

Wilmsen: So you don't know who did it.

Thomas: No. But I know it disappeared. So we had to phase out, and then we started West County Toxics Coalition. And that's where I've been active ever since. I was co-founder of West County Toxics Coalition.

Wilmsen: Was that money that disappeared from a foundation or a funder?

Thomas: From the bank.

Wilmsen: Oh, from the bank. Oh.

Thomas: See, it should have been bonded. Any money that somebody owes—money that they can go and sign—shouldn't be like that. And it was money that wasn't bonded. There wasn't no bond on it. That's bad. So we couldn't check it out. See, if it were bonded,

we'd have gotten it all back. But it wasn't bonded. They were smart enough to have an organization and no bond.

Wilmsen: Tell me about starting the West County Toxics Coalition.

Thomas: Well, we finally got grants and loans, and we have a grant writer now, and we get from different organizations: San Francisco Foundation, Abelard Foundation, the Social Welfare Foundation. In fact, we have a grant writer. We have a grant writer. She writes our grants. That's how we get grants. Funded now. We have a grant writer that does all that. I once wanted to learn how to write a grant, but after we got somebody to do it, I wasn't interested. That's probably a big thing, you know, writing grants.

Wilmsen: Does your grant writer work full time or on a contract basis?

Thomas: I don't think so, full time. I'm not sure about her, but I know she writes the grants. She gets paid of course. Because you had to pay the grant writer.

### Cleaning up Point Isabel, Polling City Council Members, and Protecting an Elementary School

Wilmsen: Yes. Now, some of the materials that Dr. Clark sent me about the West County Toxics Coalition mentioned that the federal government had slated Point Isabel and Fass Metals—

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: Do you know anything about—

Thomas: Not too much. All I know I went to Point Isabel when Geraldine Ferraro was running and the other man was running for president, and I was over there. We were there. We had a press conference over there in those places. I did go to Point Isabel.

Wilmsen: Geraldine Ferraro came?

Thomas: When she was running for vice president. I went up to Point Isabel. She came on the grounds—you know, walked over there. But we had a big press conference on Point Isabel. I remember that. I went. She didn't win.

Wilmsen: Yes. She was interested in toxic pollution cleanup?

Thomas: Yes, she was.

Wilmsen: Oh, I remember now. You were talking about polling the city council.

Thomas: Oh, yeah! That's how we knew who to vote [for]. See, once you polled them and asked them questions, then you know where they stood on these questions.

- Wilmsen: And then did they actually vote on the council in the way that they said they—
- Thomas: I don't think they did. I think we had a distortion. I don't remember nothing happening smoothly.
- Wilmsen: Oh. How did you go about getting people to vote for—
- Thomas: Well, we had to let them know how the council members stood as far as toxics. And that's how we'd tell them how to vote because if they weren't interested, that was it. And some of the people were, and some weren't. Some got to know us by West County Toxics Coalition.
- Wilmsen: How did you go about informing people?
- Thomas: Well, we just talked to them personally, you know. And when we got all that information from everybody, then we know what to tell people to vote, who was against toxics and who was for clearing up the toxics. And that was something interesting.
- Wilmsen: Did you go door to door?
- Thomas: No, no, we just polled the members and then we knew how to tell the people to vote. We didn't go from door to door.
- Wilmsen: But I mean when you were talking to people. How did you find people to talk to?
- Thomas: Well, just in the street and everywhere we went, we'd talk about it, you know. That's how I did it. We polled them. And that was interesting, as they came and I polled them [laughs]. And I stood on my scooter and did it.<sup>2</sup> I remember that.
- Wilmsen: Oh, yes?
- Thomas: [laughs]
- Wilmsen: So to inform people—
- Thomas: The mayor was really—well, the one mayor now says she's against toxics, and so that's what gave me the award for Citizen of the Month in June, this Mayor Corbin, Rosemary Corbin.
- Wilmsen: She's the present mayor?
- Thomas: Yes, Rosemary Corbin.
- Wilmsen: Who was the mayor back then?
- Thomas: Livingston, I think. George Livingston. Corbin didn't have any opposition last election. Nobody ran against her.

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2. Ms. Thomas rides a motorized scooter because she has difficulty walking.



Wilmsen: So after you polled the—

Thomas: City council?

Wilmsen: —city council and informed people how to vote, did it make a difference? Did it change the—

Thomas: I think some of them did. You know, a few of them. But I don't think all the council never would do that. It was impossible. Like, certain ones on there—some of them I knew personally. One had been on our board [laughs].

Wilmsen: Oh, really?

Thomas: [laughs]

Wilmsen: One of the city council people?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: Well, that must have helped you a lot.

Thomas: It did.

Wilmsen: Were you involved in trying to get Point Isabel and Fass Metals cleaned up?

Thomas: Well, the press coverage—I don't remember what come out of there, but I know it did get cleaned up. The press conference helped it.

Wilmsen: How satisfied were you with the way they cleaned it up?

Thomas: All right. Very satisfied.

Wilmsen: I guess one of the first campaigns of the West County Toxics Coalition was the campaign to stop the hazardous waste incinerator near Verde Elementary School?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Thomas: I think that's the pesticide plant that we closed down about three or four years ago. I think that's the same plant that closed down. They closed it up. It was near the school over there, and they closed it down completely. I think it was three or four years ago, '98 or '97 or something. They closed it down that summer. And there's no more pollution there.

Wilmsen: So that campaign lasted a long time.

Thomas: Long time.

Wilmsen: What was your role in that campaign?

Thomas: Well, I guess I just worked along with everybody else because I don't remember what I did. You know, there were some incidences where we wrote letters and called and all that, but a lot of things we just worked together as groups and got it cleaned up—demonstrations and press conferences and all that. That's how we helped to get everybody aware of it. We did a lot of press conferences in that, and that got the news out, and then after the press conferences, you know, we worked with the organization to clean that part up, because there was a lot of pollution. Still is, I guess. That I can't keep track of.

Wilmsen: How has the community responded to you?

Thomas: Well, the community is aware that there's toxics in the air. A girl came to me once. She came in here. She said, "I didn't know this. I would never have moved here." I think she moved out of this area. She said she didn't know there were that many chemical plants around and toxics. She wasn't aware and moved in this area, not knowing what it was like. She came in and talked to me. Some of the people weren't aware of any toxics, a lot of people. They just weren't. There wasn't nobody to work on the issue, so nobody knew about it. They smelled something, and that was it. A lot of people got homes over there. You know, they ain't going to move out of their homes. They bought their homes.

Wilmsen: What finally prompted them to close down the incinerator?

Thomas: I guess all the demonstrations and press conferences and actions we had. They were forced to close it down. We kept on them about it. We kept on them; didn't let up. Finally, they said, "We're going to close on a certain date." And they closed it.

Wilmsen: Were you able to do anything like get conditions attached to their permits?

Thomas: I don't remember that. See, I ain't into that too much. I don't remember nothing about the permits and all. I know we worked on the issue and got it closed.

### **Chaplain with the Richmond Police Department**

Wilmsen: Okay. Where are we on your written notes?

Thomas: On my written notes, I was mentioning about I received an award from the City of Richmond in June 1999, and I received an award from the RSVP in September of 1998. And I also graduated from the police academy in 1997, citizens academy of Richmond Police Department. I'm a chaplain, but I graduated from the citizens academy in 1997. I received an award. In 1999 I received an award from Legal Aid.

Wilmsen: Tell me about the police academy.

Thomas: Well, you have to attend it six weeks, and you get an award. They have a ceremony in city council chambers. Everybody was there. Took pictures. All the chaplains were there. We got our awards. It's on the wall back there. The trauma intervention was one

of the parts of the program, where you trained how to treat a trauma, and we were trained how to talk to people when we went on an emergency chaplain thing—somebody had an emergency in their house and we were sent there. I don't go in those anymore, but I'm still with the academy, still the police. I don't have any transportation. I told them to take me off of that. We have a pager. Each one carries a pager when they're on call. In an emergency the chaplain would be called out, and there's a [inaudible], but I'm not on that because I don't have a car. But I'm still active with them. We meet once a month.

Wilmsen: What prompted you to go and get that training?

Thomas: I wanted to help. And by me being a licensed minister—if you're not a minister, you can't be in the chaplain program. All the ministers are on there. About three are women, and the rest are men.

Wilmsen: So you're a licensed minister?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: When did you become a licensed minister?

Thomas: About six years ago.

Wilmsen: In the Baptist church?

Thomas: Non-denomination.

Wilmsen: Non-denominational. What kinds of crises did you—

Thomas: Well, crises like a murder or somebody commits suicide or somebody gets shot. The chaplain would go and talk to the family but be trained how to do it. Go to the house and talk to the family. But I don't do that because I don't have a car. But, you know, they have a pager, and we have a backup pager, and the chaplains keep that pager all the time. They can page them anytime an emergency come up. And I don't go now because I don't have a car. But I'm still with it.

Wilmsen: What was your role, then?

Thomas: My role is do the same as they do, go out on these calls, but now I just meet with them once a month. We talk about the community and what things—you know, crime that we heard about. We talk about what crimes committed and where at, and we talk about training the young people to—we trying to cut crime down. Now, our last meeting, at Davis Chapel in North Richmond, was on how to cut down on crime. That's going to be a hard thing. Getting drugs out of the community, getting crime out of the community, getting people off the streets, standing on the streets, and give them something more important to do than standing on the streets. We talked about all that last meeting at Davis Chapel in North Richmond. We meet at different churches now. We don't meet at the police department anymore. We changed. And the next meeting will be at Zion Hill Church, next month. It's once a month, second Monday of every month.

Wilmsen: Zion Hill Church?

Thomas: Yes. I'm not sure where that's at. It's in this area. But we met at Davis Chapel last meeting. And it was a house full—a lot of people.

Wilmsen: What are some of the ideas that you have for cutting down on crime?

Thomas: I guess they're going to have to get the community involved, and that means, I guess, going out there, talking to the people standing on the corners and tell them there's something better to do than that, and have some kind of training in view so they can go into training instead of standing out there. And they can still make money, but they got trained for that. It's talking about how to get them off the street.

Wilmsen: Are you working with city officials to get a training program?

Thomas: No, not directly. Indirectly. That's a lot of work. See, I don't have a car to get around. So they're starting, but I guess when they do get busy they'll be calling all of us chaplains to work with them, you know. Whatever capacity, I don't know how it will be. We're trying to get people off the street.

### Negotiating with Chevron

Wilmsen: Okay, let's go back to your work with the West County Toxics Coalition. Tell me about organizing around Chevron.

Thomas: Oh, that wasn't hard. We had memberships. In fact, we had people come in from—Irvine University students. And they trained and we had them interview here, interviewing people about the toxics and how it affected them. They paid them twenty-five dollars. Like, Chevron. A lot of people had long-term illnesses. Like, these illnesses we don't know whether they are short-term or long-term, but if you've been affected, say, five years ago and you're still affected, now that's a long time. But, see, a lot of them have been affected. Children, too. So we have been working with Chevron. Mr. Clark meets with Chevron yet. I don't meet with them anymore because I be in the office here, but he meets with their board.

And then General Chemical, we've met with them, after they had their accident. Everyone that had an accident, we met with, at some type of meeting, community.

Wilmsen: And how did those meetings go?

Thomas: Well, they were pretty good because first you had to try to find out, you know, what—these facilities that they build, sometimes they need to make adjustments, so that's why the air gets polluted. Certain adjustments, certain pipes. And I don't know about that. Certain things they had to do. Just like Tosco had a terrible accident.

Wilmsen: Yes, I remember that. That was just last year.



- Thomas: See, there are certain valves in there that I guess they wear out, and when they wear out, they give way, and then pollution goes in the air. We don't know, but the engineers and all know. [laughs] But when they don't to do anything, they get these accidents. It happens like that. And they planning how—there's an alarm system. Every third Wednesday of the month, you hear sirens going on. That's testing the alarms. We have them all over now. We're the ones that had something to do with the alarm systems put in to where the whole community can hear the alarms. Every third Wednesday, I think it is. At eleven o'clock.
- Wilmsen: I see. That's the emergency response system.
- What was it like meeting with the Chevron officials?
- Thomas: Well, they fought us at first. They didn't want to meet with us because we had some experts going in there, checking valves and things. We went in there, and they didn't like it. But after a while, they came around, and they're meeting with us now. But they didn't like it at first. We had a rough time over there.
- Wilmsen: Who were the experts who would go in there?
- Thomas: Well, the experts are the ones that know about chemicals and those plants. And, see, we went in there and checked, but I didn't know what I'm looking at, but anybody that knows anything about chemical plants and how their systems work, they know. But, see, if you don't know, you don't know. I was just looking, and I didn't know what I saw. We had some experts helping us, and they didn't like it. You know, people that knew. When they found that out, they didn't like it.
- Wilmsen: How did you get into the plants?
- Thomas: We got an interview. I mean, we asked a certain time to come in to check—we didn't say "check the plant." I don't know what we said, but we went in. We rode through, too, once, on the bus, on the bus. All around the facility. We had to have an appointment to get in.
- Wilmsen: How did you convince the Chevron officials to finally meet with you?
- Thomas: Oh, we finally made them come around with all that talking we did. They had to come around. See, some of those things was supposed to have been trade secrets. They said they were trade secrets and they were not allowed to tell them. That's what they said, "trade secrets," whatever that means. But experts that went in with us to check it, they knew. We don't know what we looking at. [laughs] I still don't know. I'm not an expert.
- Wilmsen: So when you went in with the experts, did you find anything wrong?
- Thomas: I think they found some things wrong, but they really got angry at us. They didn't know we was coming in with experts.
- Wilmsen: Oh, I see [laughs].



- Thomas: They finally came around. Now we meet with them quite often, and it's a different thing, different atmosphere. And then they gave so much money to build that center for health in North Richmond. They gave so much money to build that, and some money for other things, but I know some of that money went toward the health center. General Chemical spill: some of that money went toward building the center for health at North Richmond. So every time I look at that center, I think about that.
- Wilmsen: Now, were you involved in Communities for a Better Environment [CBE]?
- Thomas: Well, indirectly because they work with us. We're the only organization in that, has an office in Richmond. They're in San Francisco, but they work with us, supposed to be working with us. Communities for a Better Environment, CBE and also APEN, Asian Pacific Environmental Group. They're in Richmond and Oakland, too. It's an Asian group.
- Wilmsen: Oh, I see. And you cooperate with them, too?
- Thomas: Yes.
- Wilmsen: What kinds of things do you cooperate with them on?
- Thomas: Oh, any kind of toxics issues. There are quite a few issues we work with them on. I don't talk to them that much, but they work with us. They're in Oakland and Richmond. They have an office on Twenty-fifth Street, I think, in Richmond. In Oakland, I don't know what street.
- Wilmsen: Now, when you were negotiating with Chevron, did you get support from any other groups or from the government at all?
- Thomas: We got support from CBE and APEN. We worked also with the women cancer group in Berkeley, something to do with cancer in women. It's a women cancer group we work with, too. It's in Berkeley, on Ashby.
- Wilmsen: What about any government: national or state or county government?
- Thomas: Mr. Clark would know. I don't know. He's on the Hazardous Materials Commission. And there are some other boards he's on—I don't know. He's with MAC [Municipal Advisory Council] in North Richmond. They're working on issues, the same thing. MAC and all that. But I don't work with them closely. Only time I went to them was when I wanted to ask for one of their rooms in the health center to be named for Mr. Witt. That's when I went before them. And they did it.
- Wilmsen: I see. What about other environmental groups?
- Thomas: There's none right now.
- Wilmsen: Like the Sierra Club.

Thomas: Oh, yeah. We're not working directly with the Sierra Club no more. I don't hear too much about them. But we're still with APEN and CBE and the women cancer group and—

##

Wilmsen: What were the issues that you negotiated with Chevron officials on?

Thomas: We worked on the fence line and worked on valves. We worked on monitoring the pollution when it comes out. I can't say because I ain't up on that thing, but I know the valves and monitoring and fence line. We also worked on getting the alarm system which we got in place and letting everybody know when—ooh, I can't think any more.

Wilmsen: What was the fence line?

Thomas: That had something to do with how far the pollution goes. It had to be a certain number of inches, or something like that. See, I can't say it like he [Mr. Clark] can say it.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Thomas: I'm not up on that, but I know that we worked on different things like improving the valves so there wouldn't be an accident. You know, making sure there would be no accident again and all that. And then we worked on—well, the Chevron in my neighborhood did a funny thing. It put some dirt in there and left it about eight days, and they didn't tell nobody. The dirt stayed on the ground about eight days, and then they started to move it because we demonstrated in the neighborhood.

They left it there, and when we kicked about it to City Council, they moved it. About eight trucks came and moved that there. [interruption for office business] That was about something, an important meeting going on about dioxin. That's another thing we're working on. There's dioxin in milk and everything. You'd be surprised. There's so much pollution here.

Wilmsen: When did you get involved with dioxin?

Thomas: Well, we've been working on that a long time, dioxin. It's in milk in everything. You'd be surprised. Everything you eat or drink, there's something in it.

Wilmsen: What are you doing to—

Thomas: We're trying to find out how we can cut down on the foods and all, but I guess we'd have to test the stuff. How do you know dioxin is in it? We're having a meeting tomorrow night at seven o'clock, at CBE.

Wilmsen: Oh. That's who we were just talking about.

Thomas: Yes. [laughs] They're going to meet me here at the office because I can't direct them how to get to my house.

Wilmsen: Now, when you went to negotiate with the Chevron officials, you negotiated also?

- Thomas: Not really. I didn't go to all the meetings because when they negotiated, it was a hard time to sit down at the table with them. They wouldn't do it at first. They was angry. It took a while. Then they finally said, "Yes, we will meet you." We met here on several occasions, met at their office. A lot of the time I think Mr. Clark meets at their office now. They don't come here.
- Wilmsen: And what was your role?
- Thomas: Well, I was just mostly a listener, listening to what they say [laughs], and working with whatever we had to do to clear it up. We went to a lot of meetings with them because they was angry at first. We had meetings with them.
- Wilmsen: Okay. [long pause] Tell me about negotiating a good neighborhood agreement with Chevron.
- Thomas: Ooh, good neighbor. I don't know how it went. I know it worked out finally, but it was hard negotiating as a good neighbor. When they mention that good neighbor and the right to know, that was a long road, good neighbor. But I guess they consider themselves a good neighbor now.
- Wilmsen: Do you consider them a good neighbor?
- Thomas: They have cut down on some of the pollutions. We had told them what we wanted to do was not stop it, but cut down on it, because a lot of it was going on. When they picked that gas and took something out of the gas, they went up on the gas. I notice they went up on the gas. They took that certain chemical out of their gas, and they went up on it.
- Wilmsen: You mean the price.
- Thomas: [Nods head, yes] Real high now.
- Wilmsen: What were the obstacles to getting the good neighbor agreement?
- Thomas: I guess we had to agree with a lot of things. I'm sure that we agreed to the right things because we wouldn't have had the good neighbor agreement. They had agreed to some things we wanted and I don't know what they were. See, I'm not informed like Henry is. All I know is we did come through with it finally. Finally.
- Wilmsen: Did any of the accidents give you any kind of opportunities in your negotiations with Chevron?
- Thomas: Not really, but I noticed that one law firm decided to sue them for every accident they had in Richmond, every one they ever had, 1980 to now. Sued them for every accident. And the law firm is working on it. Every accident they ever had in Richmond, they sued them for it—because the paper came out and I saw it. Every one, from 1980 to 1999.
- Wilmsen: This is a lawsuit they're developing right now? That's interesting.
- Thomas: I got the paper in the mail that said it. It named every date.

Wilmsen: Is it a class action suit?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: I see. So on behalf of—

Thomas: Every accident they ever had in Richmond.

Wilmsen: —residents of Richmond?

Thomas: I think it's just Richmond.

Wilmsen: What do you think were the organizing lessons that you learned from your experiences with Chevron?

Thomas: Once you ask for something, you stick to it until you get it. And then you have to have people that want to work with you, to work for that to happen. And we have to have people that want to change their community or change the environment, who want to live longer in life. We won't live longer with all the toxics. And people working together, as a rule, as groups, as people would help make things happen. And action can sure make them happen. And press conferences sure make them happen.

Wilmsen: How do you overcome any kind of resistance in the community to what you're trying to do?

Thomas: Some people are afraid, so you tell the ones that are afraid to stay home. [laughter] But I mean, I noticed that. I've had a lot of action and never been locked up, never been in jail. So if you're afraid, stay home. Then people who are not afraid will come out.

Wilmsen: I see. So you think they're afraid of going to jail?

Thomas: But I ain't. Because I've been in too many and never went to jail. Gray Panthers and everything.

Wilmsen: You've done a lot of actual demonstrating.

Thomas: That's right. And never went to jail.

### **Demonstrating for Jesse Jackson in the South, and Other Action**

Wilmsen: Was that demonstrating against Chevron?

Thomas: Chevron, other things. Like in Pennsylvania, when we went out of town, we demonstrated in Wisconsin and Los Angeles and St. Louis and Arkansas. We demonstrated all over the South when they went down there. In fact, we had literature we gave out for Jesse Jackson when we demonstrated. And I caravanned for him and went all through the South.



Wilmsen: For Jesse Jackson.

Thomas: All the caravan. Seven days.

Wilmsen: Oh, wow.

Thomas: That was fun. No expenses. We didn't have to pay nothing and sleep nowhere and pay nothing to eat nowhere.

Wilmsen: You were organizing voters then?

Thomas: Yes, all through the South. St. Louis, and all. Mississippi, Arkansas, New Orleans.

Wilmsen: And where was your husband—

Thomas: At home.

Wilmsen: —during all this? How did he feel about you leaving?

Thomas: [laughs] If he felt bad, I still went. See, once I make my mind to do something, you can't stop me. I was gone a whole week, and that's a long trip. We went all through the South. That's a big experience. Went to New Orleans, and we saw the French Quarter and everything. I didn't get to eat that—they were talking about that meal they fixed down there, but I didn't get to eat that.

Wilmsen: Were you involved in the civil rights movement in the sixties?

Thomas: I don't think so. I was in school then. I didn't get involved then. I was thinking more about education. I just got involved later. I wasn't involved because I think I was in school then.

Wilmsen: In the 1960s?

Thomas: Yes. No, I had one boy in '64. I wasn't in school. But I wasn't involved like I am now. I don't remember being involved. I got really involved when I came out here, but I started back in Pennsylvania. That's where I really started at.

We had a neighborhood council, and the neighborhood council talked to some people in the community and asked if they wanted to go to be in VISTA, and if they wanted to go into training. And they sent me a ticket, round-trip airfare ticket, and everybody was going to go. They paid for everything. I looked at the ticket, and I said to my husband, "I want to go to this training." So the lady in the neighborhood council said she would go up there and talk to him because he would never be able to send me there himself. So she talked to him and he said yes. I left the children with him. [laughs]

See, that was it. I was raising a family. I'd go to school—PTA. I was involved with PTA when my children were in school. I was involved with this program, the first hot lunches in schools. The first hot lunch they got in the school, we'd sample it, the PTA.

Wilmsen: Oh, you would sample it.



Thomas: I was with the PTA, too. I was a den mother for the Cub Scouts. I went to Blue and Gold dinners. Oh, a lot was going on. And one of my sons was in my den.

Wilmsen: Did I ask you what your husband did out here?

Thomas: Construction work. He did labor work.

Wilmsen: I think I did ask you.

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: What have been the other major campaigns you've been involved in with the West County Toxics Coalition, other than the Chevron campaign?

Thomas: Let's see, what else did we get involved in? Membership campaigns, how to get more members. And getting more people involved, it's hard to do that. Nobody likes to get involved completely. Getting people involved regularly. Some of them want to be members, but they don't want to get involved. And it's like I said: they're afraid. A lot of people don't like to demonstrate, but I ain't never been locked up. I tell them that, but I guess it doesn't make much difference because, see, once you get out there, you're afraid, but I never been afraid. I just went on. I've never been afraid because I didn't think I'd get locked up for demonstrating, as long as you weren't trespassing on property or something. And we have gone on property, but we didn't get locked up.

In Little Rock, we were demonstrating on a plant there, and we all went into this building. The bus was there. We marched to the building, went in, and everybody was in line, and I just pushed the people in front of me so they'd go ahead in. [laughter]

Wilmsen: You made them go in.

Thomas: This is the truth. They didn't know we were coming. They polluted Lake Michigan—not Lake Michigan—let's see, what lake was that? It was in Little Rock. There's a lake. Anyhow, they had polluted it with chemicals. The life in there was no life, so we demonstrated on them, and they didn't do anything but call the police. The police didn't lock anybody up. Pretty soon we were out of there.

Wilmsen: Was that working for the West County Toxics Coalition?

Thomas: Yes.

Wilmsen: When was that?

Thomas: That was about three or four years ago, five years ago.

Wilmsen: How did you end up going out to Arkansas to demonstrate?

Thomas: Because that's when we were with Jesse Jackson.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

- Thomas: Yes, a long time ago.
- Wilmsen: On your trip through the South.
- Thomas: On my trips, yes. All through the South—St. Louis, New Orleans, Mississippi, Alabama. I don't remember all the places. We stopped in every little town. Bogalusa, Louisiana. I remember that because I had a button that said, "Bogalusa."
- Wilmsen: What did the police do when they got to that plant in Arkansas?
- Thomas: They just mostly stood around, looked like to me, and then they left [laughs]. They might have asked a few questions of a few people, but they didn't stick around. Every town I was in, when the police came, they left.
- Wilmsen: Interesting.
- Thomas: Long as we weren't destroying property and everything, and hurt nobody—what else are they going to lock you up for? And Gray Panthers. I demonstrated with them a lot, too.
- Wilmsen: What did you demonstrate on?
- Thomas: We demonstrated on certain issues like health issues. And down at the Kennedy School we demonstrated on something one time, the Gray Panthers. And we were on—well, the property is not private property. Certain properties are not private, you know, like the sidewalk. And we were also demonstrating on some of these officials. I forget whose houses we went to. And embarrass them. Go to their house.
- Wilmsen: I guess that would embarrass them.
- Thomas: The neighbors onlooking.
- Wilmsen: Yes. Okay, so you worked on membership—
- Thomas: Membership campaigns and building the membership and press conference. I been to a lot of press conferences, where they talked to the press. Had a lot of training programs. We do a lot of training. We had somebody coming in to train us. I think it was a whole month, but I think he came in here and was training us about different things: how to do a press conference and all that. We paid some people to come in here to do that from C3. You heard of them?
- Wilmsen: No.
- Thomas: They're in Oakland. It's a great program. C3. It's a group that works on issues in neighborhoods. C3. Tim Sampson is one of the trainers. There was another man, but I can't think of his name. But Tim Sampson was with us, with Citizens Action League all the way. He's a professor.
- Wilmsen: Do you train people also?

Thomas: Not lately. We haven't had a training session lately. I don't do it. I could have, but I hadn't been. I can. They never asked me because they paid people, see? When you're training, the person has to get paid. It's not a free thing. So they didn't ask me to do it because it may be a conflict of interest because I'd get paid.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Thomas: I've been in training. I went to Little Rock twice and got trained for ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now]. Sent me into Little Rock. Expenses was all paid, and I stayed about a week each time, and they trained me, ACORN did. And I got that certificate.

Wilmsen: What kind of training was that for?

Thomas: For the job we're doing now.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Thomas: They're still in Oakland, though, but I haven't called them. They have a building in Oakland, and they have a business training people, you know. They have staff people and they have training people to do that. But that started in Arkansas. ACORN started in Arkansas.

Wilmsen: And then what about Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste?

Thomas: [whispers] I don't know too much about that.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Thomas: I know of them and all, and they had something to do with our training upstairs [at the Legal Aid office], too, but I don't know. They have board people trained for, like, a week or something, or maybe a retreat, and they stay shut in for a day's training. I've been in a lot of retreats.

Wilmsen: What other campaigns have you worked on?

Thomas: I can't think of any more right now.

Wilmsen: Okay. What else is on your notes? Have we covered everything?

Thomas: I think we covered everything. We covered everything. And I just say on the end of it I will celebrate my seventy-second birthday on the seventeenth of February, year 2000. And that's all I put down there.

**The Present Condition of the Environment in Richmond, and Cooperating with Other Environmental Groups**

- Wilmsen: Okay. Well, I just have a few more questions. How do you find the environment in Richmond now?
- Thomas: Better. Since we're aware of all the pollution, Chevron I'm sure has put new valves in and shut down some of this because they used to let all this stuff out late at night. I don't think they do that anymore. They figure everybody's sleeping and they let all this out at night. At night—you know, up the smokestack at night. Of course, nobody listened, and nobody noticed them but people will be watching now. And it's more over that-a-way, more in North Richmond. I live in central Richmond.
- Wilmsen: Okay, so you're not near the refinery?
- Thomas: Not real close to it. The only way I can see it is when I go over that-a-way and be going to work, that area; then I'll see all the smokestacks down there.
- Wilmsen: Do you still notice smells like you did when you first came out?
- Thomas: Not like then. I think we did make an impact somewhere, and they do not have as many accidents, I know of. If they have one, it's very small. I don't hear of no accidents lately.
- Wilmsen: Yes.
- Thomas: I think they had let some of their staff go. I don't know what they did. They fired some people. That had a lot to do with the work.
- Wilmsen: And how do you feel about the big environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society?
- Thomas: I think working together we could do a lot of good. Togetherness. We need to work together for the same goals and to achieve the same things as the other person is. If we work close together and continue to work close together, we won't have as much pollution and accidents like we had.
- Wilmsen: Yes. Are you saying that you think you should work together more?
- Thomas: Well, no. I think we're working together enough because there are a lot of meetings—like, tomorrow night. You have to go over there to the dioxin meeting. Well, you've got to show up because it is concerning our organization, but I don't like a lot of meetings anymore.
- Wilmsen: So who's going to be at that meeting?
- Thomas: I'm going to be there, Mr. Clark, some other board members, and CBE and some of their people.

And we got the bucket brigade. I forgot to mention that. Last Monday we met in the library at Richmond. Barbara Boxer was supposed to show up, but her aide came, about the bucket brigade. Takes all the chemicals in there, and they train how to do that. Not everybody. Some of the people on the bucket brigade keeps the bucket in their house. And when the chemicals spill, they catch it and pour it in their bucket and have it sampled. It's called bucket brigade. I forgot to mention that.

Wilmsen: When did that get started?

Thomas: Oh, about five or six years ago that got off the ground. Now they need more money to keep it going. They buying more buckets and putting more contraptions on it.

Wilmsen: Who started that?

Thomas: We and CBE. We worked with CBE. I won't say we did it because we had to work with them in order to start it. And we have folks at different places. We have people with buckets. And that's just interesting that they catch the chemical in that bucket and get it tested. The officials say, "No, it wasn't no pollution."

Wilmsen: Yes. Wouldn't you be afraid of getting chemicals on you when you go with a bucket to collect some?

Thomas: You know what? I never asked them that. And there's a lot of people doing it. I would be!

Wilmsen: I would be, too [laughs].

What I was asking was about this meeting tomorrow night.

Thomas: That's a dioxin meeting.

Wilmsen: What other environmental groups will be there besides—

Thomas: I guess APEN will be there.

Wilmsen: Oh, APEN?

Thomas: Asian Pacific Environmental Network. That's APEN. And I don't know who else will be there. Some other people from other areas of the community will be there, like Martinez and other parts of the East Bay that don't live around here but they'll be there. They'll be there. And some news people. I don't know what news people will be there.

Wilmsen: Okay. Well, is there anything you want to add?

Thomas: No.

Wilmsen: Anything I haven't covered?



- Thomas: I think we covered everything, and I think this interview is very nice. I had written out some stuff, but that's all right. It helped a little bit. But I enjoyed the interview, and I'm looking to get a transcript of it. You'll send me one?
- Wilmsen: I will, when it gets transcribed, and then I edit it to make sure everything is clear.
- Thomas: Because I talked kind of bumpy in some of the places.
- Wilmsen: Well, everybody does.
- Thomas: [laughs] I stumbled a little.
- Wilmsen: That's just the way people talk. And then, once I get that finished, I'll send it off to you.
- Thomas: All right. And do I need to check anything? No. You send a tape. Won't it be a tape?
- Wilmsen: No, it will be a written transcript.
- Thomas: Oh, good, good. And that'll be in the library at Berkeley, huh?
- Wilmsen: Yes.
- Thomas: It'll be public information, right?
- Wilmsen: That's right.
- Thomas: Ah, that's good.
- Wilmsen: And also a copy at UCLA.
- Thomas: Oh, where people can see it.
- Wilmsen: Yes.
- Thomas: That sounds good.
- Wilmsen: In the library.
- Thomas: Spell my name right! Did you?
- Wilmsen: Yes, A-h-m-a-d-i-a.
- Thomas: That's right.
- Wilmsen: Okay.

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## TAPE GUIDE—Fighting Toxic Emissions in Richmond California, 1984-2000

## INTERVIEWS WITH HENRY CLARK

## Interview 1: December 6, 1999

Tape 1, Side A	1
Tape 1, Side B	7
Tape 2, Side A	13
Tape 2, Side B not recorded	

## Interview 2: December 13, 1999

Tape 3, Side A	19
Tape 3, Side B	27
Tape 4, Side A	33
Tape 4, Side B	41

## Interview 3: December 17, 1999

Tape 5, Side A	46
Tape 5, Side B	53
Tape 6, Side A	62
Tape 6, Side B	69

## INTERVIEW WITH AHMADIA THOMAS

## Date of Interview: February 22, 2000

Tape 1, Side A	79
Tape 2, Side B	94
Tape 3, Side A	107
Tape 3, Side B not recorded	



## INDEX -- Henry Clark and Ahmadia Thomas

- Abelard Foundation 99
- accident prevention plans 49–51
- ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) 90–93, 95, 98, 113
- Advanced Environmental Technology Services (AETS) 38
- Aerojet 38
- Afro-American environmental justice activists network 67–68
- Anderson, Cal 2, 4
- Angel, Bradley 47
- anti-war movement 2
- Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) 27, 67, 106, 107, 115
- Audubon Society 114
  
- Bay Area Air Quality Management District 32
- Bay Area Environmental 38
- Boxer, Barbara 115
- Burke, Ida 16
  
- C3 112
- Cal Poly State University 1, 12
- California Rural Legal Assistance 30
- California State Health Department 38
- Central Action 60
- Chevron
  - air quality 114
  - community advisory panel 25
  - contributions to community groups 15, 38
  - funding for Neighborhood House 15–16
  - good neighbor agreement 41
  - labor unions 26
  - meeting with WCTC 96
  - negotiating with WCTC 24–26, 104–109
  - operations in Nigeria 56, 59
  - organizing lessons learned 36, 109
  - removal of environmental hazards 70
  - Richmond cancer cluster 42
  - Richmond refinery 5
  - water quality issues with 23, 34
  - workforce 26–27
- Citizens Action League 90–93, 95, 112
- Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes 39
- Civil Rights Act, Title VI 55
- civil rights movement 2, 66, 110
  
- Clark, Henry
  - 1999 trip to Nigeria 56, 60
  - born 1
  - college education 11–14
  - conscientious objector 2
  - father 1
  - growing up in North Richmond 3–5
  - mother 1
  - musical interests 9–10
  - PhD in religious counseling 60–61
  - reading 10
  - religion 6–9, 60–61
- Clean Air Act 34, 58
- Clean Water Act 34
- Cole, Luke 31
- Communities for a Better Environment (CBE)
  - bucket brigade 114
  - legal resources 30
  - negotiations with Chevron 24, 106
  - support for county ordinances 44
  - taking county to court 45
  - working with WCTC 27
- community early warning system 35–36, 48, 70, 105
- Contra Costa County
  - Hazardous Materials Commission 51, 106
  - Health Department 38
  - Planning Commission 44
- Corbin, Rosemary 100
  
- Department of Toxic Substance Control 23
- Drew Salvage 94
  
- Earth Day
  - 1990 24
  - 2000 69
- Environmental Justice Law Clinic 27, 30
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 29, 34, 47, 55
- Erickson Hazardous Waste treatment and transfer station 43
  
- Fass Metals 99, 101
- Ferraro, Geraldine 99
  
- Gap 57, 59
- General Chemical Company 31, 35, 48, 96, 104
- Global Exchange 60
- Golden Gate University Environmental Justice Law

- Clinic 27, 30
- Gray Panthers 98, 112
- Greenpeace 27, 41, 67
- Hayes, Dennis 24
- hazardous waste levy 38–39
- Hercules Powder Company 11
- Holt, Hal 15
- ICI Americas 43
- Jackson, Jesse 24, 109, 110
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. 2, 8, 10
- Legal Aid 96, 102
- Livingston, George 100
- Madden, Lloyd 14
- Malcolm X 2, 9, 10
- Midwest Academy 39
- Miller, George 58
- Mobil Oil Company 56
- Mobile, Arizona 47
- NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) 57–58
- National Toxics Campaign 37
- Neighborhood House 2, 4, 12, 14–16
- Nigeria 56, 60
- North Richmond
  - Center for Health 71, 106
  - encouraging responsible development in 62–64
  - first-source hire policy 63
  - growing up in (Henry Clark) 3–5
  - Minnie Lou's Cafe 4
  - Municipal Advisory Council 6, 61, 106
  - Neighborhood Council 14
  - Neighborhood House 14–16, 61
  - Savoy Club 4
  - West County Landfill 49
  - Youth Community Center 12, 14
- O'Connor, John 24, 91, 93, 95
- Ortho Chemical Company 22, 24
- People of Color Environmental Justice Summit 40, 51, 64
- PG&E (Pacific Gas and Electric) 20
- Point Isabel 99
- PTA 110
- Reed, Charlie 1, 2, 4
- Regional Water Board 34
- Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) 97, 102
- Richmond, California
  - city council 34, 96
  - City of 39, 102
  - coordinating council 25
  - neighborhood councils 25
  - police department 102
- Ross, Jerry 24
- Safeway fire 46–47, 48
- Sampson, Tim 95, 112
- San Francisco Foundation 37, 97, 99
- San Francisco State University 11–14
- Shell Oil Company 56, 59
- Shields Reed Park 2, 4
- Sierra Club 27, 44, 67, 107, 114
- Smith, Damu 41
- Social Welfare Foundation 99
- Southern Organizing Project 41, 67
- Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice 57, 59
- Southwest Organizing Project 41, 67
- Stauffer Chemical Company 43
- Thomas, Ahmadia
  - awards 102
  - born 79
  - chaplain with the Richmond Police Department 102–104
  - father 79
  - Girl Reserves 80
  - growing up 79–83
  - marriage 87
  - mother 79
  - move to California 88–90
  - organizing voters in the South 109–110
  - PTA involvement 110
  - religion in upbringing 82
  - VISTA volunteer 83–88, 110
- Tosco 104
- Tucker, Connie 41
- United Heckathorn 47



Verde Elementary School 20, 101  
 Vietnam War 2  
 VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) 83, 91,  
 110  
  
 Wal-Mart 57  
 Waste Management 47  
 West County Toxics Coalition  
   1982 formation of 96, 98  
   1984-present 19–53  
   Ahmadia Thomas and 98  
   campaigns  
     Clean Air Act reauthorization 58  
     community early warning system 35  
     General Chemical Company 32  
     hazardous waste treatment and transfer sta-  
       tion 44  
     incinerator near Verde Elementary School  
       20, 101  
     Little Rock, Arkansas 111  
     Nigeria 60  
     Point Isabel 99  
     Richmond cancer cluster 42  
     Southwest Network 59  
 Chevron and 15, 16, 23, 24, 104  
 Citizens Action League and 90, 91  
 community advisory panel and 25  
 County Planning Commission and 44  
 fund-raising for 37–39  
 government agencies and 29  
 Henry Clark and 7, 12, 15, 19, 20, 61  
 lawsuits and 30, 31  
 North Richmond and 15, 61, 70  
 other environmental groups and 27, 66, 68, 69  
 Williams, Craig 20, 91, 95, 96  
 Witt, Ernie, Sr. 96, 106  
 Wright, Beverly 41  
 WTO (World Trade Organization) 57, 58, 59  
  
 Xavier University 41  
  
 Zeneca 43



Carl Wilmsen

B.A., 1984, University of Arizona, Asian Studies (minor in Forestry).

M.A., 1988, University of Hawaii, Geography. Thesis title: Forest Perception and Management in Kochi Prefecture, Japan, based on a year and a half of field work in Japan.

Ph.D., 1997, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, Geography with emphasis on natural resources, forest ecology and management, and geographic information systems. Dissertation title: Fighting for the Forest: Sustainability and Social Justice in Vallecitos, New Mexico, based on field work in Vallecitos.

Instructor, University of New Mexico, 1995-1997.  
Consultant in sustainable agriculture and rural community development to New Mexico State University, 1992-1999.

Interviewer/Editor, Regional Oral History Office, in the field of natural resources and the environment, 1997-2000.

Program Coordinator, U.S. Community Forestry Research Fellowship Program, College of Natural Resources, University of California, Berkeley, 2000-present.











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